

Karl Popper's Ideas on History

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## Abstract of Thesis

In this thesis the shaping and the validity of Popper's ideas on history are examined.

Chapter One. It is argued that there are important similarities between the account of scientific method which Popper gives in The Logic of Scientific Discovery and the view which professional historians take of the methods of their craft. Both yield only tentative results, not certainties, because results are in both cases open to criticism.

Chapter Two. It is argued that Popper's original advocacy of the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation has been misinterpreted by commentators who have not considered it in the context of his critique of historicism. Various of his arguments in this connection are shown to be attempts to displace doctrines associated with claims for a distinctive logic of historical explanation. Popper's usage of "trivial" to characterize the laws presupposed in historical explanations is shown to be ambiguous in a way that gives rise to difficulties in Popper's analysis of historical explanation. Moreover, the historian's "line of interest" need not be restricted to describing and explaining specific events, as Popper maintains.

Chapter Three. It is argued that one of Popper's main purposes in proposing situational logic as an analysis of historical explanation is to dispense with empathic understanding in historical work. Popper does not establish this

point. Popper's views on situational logic are shown to be quite similar to Collingwood's ideas on historical thinking. It is argued that situational analysis as understood by Popper cannot provide satisfactory historical explanations without resort to empathic understanding, and that the results of empathic understanding can be presented as open to criticism and thus objective.

Chapter Four. Popper's analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism is shown not to hang together, because the adherent of anti-naturalistic historicism is not thereby committed to the pro-naturalistic doctrine of historical prophecy by means of trends. Popper's attempt to connect these two sets of doctrines is, it is argued, a political rather than a methodological criticism of Historicismus.

Chapter Five. Popper's argument that the historian must rely on untestable points of view to organize historical accounts is shown to rest on an untenable assumption: that all subsequent historical interpretations must "fit in with" the point of view of "severely limited" "'sources' of history". It is argued to the contrary that historical interpretation is a critical activity in which historians are engaged in revising the traditions of historical knowledge.

Chapter Six. Popper is shown not to have considered important practical difficulties in the way of his proposed method of social reform, piecemeal engineering. Weaknesses are found in his attempt to establish analogies between his analysis of

scientific method and piecemeal social engineering. Popper's methodological individualism is shown to rest on ethico-political considerations which do not entail the methodology. If methodological individualism can refer to situations, then the position is equivalent to a moderate methodological holism.

Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. The Concerns of this Thesis

Karl Popper in his best known works, The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, takes a dim view of history: a view which is dimmer than might be expected on the basis of the analysis of scientific method which Popper published in the days of the Vienna Circle.<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of this thesis it is argued that the "practice of history"<sup>2</sup>, as understood by a professional historian, bears considerable similarity to the view of science which Popper develops in The Logic of Scientific Discovery. Certainty is not to be had in either case. The results obtained by an active investigator, not a passive recorder of authoritative "sources of knowledge", are always open to revision. Whether historical work can be objective in the generalized sense in which Popper understands this concept<sup>3</sup> will be considered at various points in this thesis.<sup>4</sup>

In The Open Society in particular, Popper sees a considerable gulf between scientific work and the practice of history. Schematically, the contrast which Popper draws between science and history in this publication may be stated in the following way: while Popper rejects the con-

1. Die Logik der Forschung (Vienna, 1934), translated as The Logic of Scientific Discovery (London, 1959). Hereafter cited as LSD.

2. The term history is ambiguous: it may refer either to what happened in the past, or to what we claim to know about the past. It is sometimes difficult to avoid this ambiguity without resort to ugly circumlocutions. The title of G.R. Elton's recent book, The Practice of History (London, 1967) is a clear and attractive expression of the second sense of the term history; I find I used this same phrase in parts of this thesis written before I read Elton's book. I shall make frequent use of this phrase in what follows. I should like to acknowledge Elton's usage here, and use this phrase, subsequently, without quotation marks.

3. Cf. LSD, p. 44, text and footnote added to the 1959 edition: Popper's conception of objectivity is discussed below, ~~pp. Chapter II~~, p. ~~106-107~~

4. Cf. below, ~~pp. Chapter III~~ ~~IV~~



ventionalist account of scientific theories as inadequate<sup>1</sup>, he thinks that there is a good deal to be said for a conventionalist view of historical interpretations as mental creations which are "circular" because ~~we cannot overcome the limitations of historical evidence.~~

~~"we can only get out of our factual experience what we have ourselves put into it..." 2.~~

It is argued in chapter five that the contentions about historical evidence, on which Popper bases his case for the circularity of historical interpretations, do not stand up to examination. If there is no exact analogy to the testing of scientific theories by controlled experiments - a prominent form of the endeavour to falsify theories which Popper thinks refutes the conventionalist claim "that science always argues in a circle"<sup>3</sup> - historical evidence is nevertheless open to criticism, and the circularity which Popper thinks characteristic of historical interpretations does not arise. Moreover the relation of such criticism to the traditions of historical knowledge suggests that there is an important sense, related to the generalized sense in which Popper understands objectivity, in which the idea of objectivity is applicable to historical work; Popper's claim that it is "inapplicable"<sup>4</sup> is rejected, and it will be seen that he has retracted this claim, at least in part, in some of his later writings.

In later publications, less well-known than The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, Popper sees more of an analogy between history and science, in connection with his recommendation of situational logic to historians and social scientists.<sup>5</sup> There is, nonetheless, the problem

1. In LSD and more briefly in chapter 25, OS, sec. i(OS, II, 259-260). Cf. below, chapter one.

In this thesis, The Open Society and its Enemies will be cited as OS; The Poverty of Historicism as PH. My citations of OS are from the fourth edition (published in paperback by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962); as there are considerable differences in the pagination of the various editions of OS, where feasible I have given further indications of where the relevant passage is to be found: e.g. in a numbered note to a particular chapter or in a numbered subsection of a chapter.

2. OS, II, 266, 259 3. OS, II, 259 4. OS, II, 268

5. "Historical Explanation: An Interview" Cambridge Opinion, 28 (1962), pp. 20-25; "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," Kolner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Köln, 14(1962) no.2., pp. 233-258.

Popper's ideas on situational logic in these publications are discussed below in chapter three.

of accounting for Popper's unflattering and inaccurate picture of history in The Open Society, which has appeared in several anthologies.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that Popper does not derive this image strictly by comparison with his analysis of scientific method. An Ariadne's thread in this puzzle is provided by Popper's concept of historicism. Although "historicism is not history"<sup>2</sup> there turn out to be some significant links between the analysis which Popper gives of historicist method and certain theories of historical method. In The Poverty of Historicism Popper organizes his presentation of historicist method into anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines which he says "are combined" in the "characteristic approach" of historicism.<sup>3</sup> It is argued in chapter four on Historicism, that historicism is not as "close-knit"<sup>4</sup> as Popper claims: that one may consistently accept the anti-naturalistic doctrines, which closely resemble the doctrines known as Historismus, and reject the pro-naturalistic theory of developmental laws in support of historical prophecy. The utility of Popper's schema of historicist method is, then, in doubt, for he claims to have explicated the hitherto concealed logic of historicist prophecy, to which historicists themselves have been blind.<sup>5</sup> But representatives of Historismus, such as Rickert, who subscribe to something of the anti-naturalistic side of Popper's historicism, have been sufficiently aware of the pro-naturalistic side to reject it.

Nonetheless, if there is no logical connection between the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic methodologies which Popper classes as historicist, there is a certain political unity. Karl Mannheim, whom Popper considers an arch-historicist, has suggested that, of the three ideologies of conservatism, classical liberalism and socialism, liberalism is the odd one out, in that the other two are based on similar social ontologies, wherein the individual is constituted by his social relations,

1. Contemporary Philosophy, ed. J.L. Jarrett and S.N. McMurrin, (New York, 1954); The Philosophy of History in Our Time, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (New York, 1959); Geist und Gesicht der Gegenwart, ed. by Otto Molden (Zurich, 1962)

2. OS, II, 59.

3. PH, p. 3.

4. PH, p. 3.

5. PH, p.3.

whereas liberalism is premised on a self-contained view of the individual.<sup>1.</sup> What Popper calls holism, which turns out to be a rejection of the classical liberal view of the individual defended by Popper, is common to both pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism.<sup>2.</sup> An important instance of what Popper calls anti-naturalistic historicism, the doctrine of historical method known as Historismus, was closely associated with a rejection of Western Liberalism in Germany.<sup>3.</sup> If the absence of a strong liberal tradition in Germany is considered to be fundamental in the rise of Nazism, then the influence of Historismus could be considered a pre-disposing condition to Nazism. But if Popper's analysis of pro-naturalistic historicism pretends to be an account of Nazi totalitarianism - and such seems to be his intention.<sup>4.</sup> - then he has misrepresented Nazism by over-intellectualizing it: for the way in which power was seized and controlled is far more important in explaining Nazism than any ideology of historical prophecy.

Popper's critique of historicism, which has, as has been suggested, a political rather than a logical or methodological unity, is directed against a wider front<sup>5.</sup> than just Nazism; he means to expose those conceptions of social policy which he thinks supply the slippery road to totalitarianisms, both of the left and of the right. What is at issue for Popper is a matter

1. Karl Mannheim "Conservative Thought, Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London, 1953), pp. 91-94 and 112-113.

2. PH, p. 105.

3. G.G. Iggers, "The Dissolution of German Historism, " Ideas in History, essays presented to Louis Gottschalk by his former students ed. by Richard Herr and Harold T. Parker (Duke University Press, 1965), p. 327-8. The following sentence summarizes what seems to be Iggers' argument in his recent book, The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn, 1968).

4. Cf. Popper's dedication of PH; also his Addendum (1961) OS, II 393.

5. P. Gardiner makes the point that Popper's attack on historicism is on a wider front (Philosophical Quarterly IX(1959), p. 173) but he describes this front as methodological rather than political.



of a sound approach to social policy: Popper attempts to establish the policy of liberal individualism, which he calls "piecemeal engineering", as "unassailable"<sup>1</sup>, and those procedures of social reform - "Utopian" or "holistic engineering" - which ignore its stipulations as fundamentally misconceived and consequently "impossible"<sup>2</sup>; and, through their practical failures, conducive to totalitarianism. Popper's consideration of the methods of social analysis, methodological individualism versus methodological holism, parallels his examination of approaches to social policy.<sup>3</sup> Following the thread of individualism, which is central to liberalism as Popper understands it, will be seen to clarify Popper's critique of historicism. Popper's approach to history and historicism is as much ideological as methodological. His critique of historicism and his harshness towards the practice of history are, it is argued, ideologically shaped; his views on historical explanation are shaped by his criticism of methodological doctrines which he attributes to anti-naturalistic historicism.

In the second and third chapters, Popper's various discussions of historical explanation are examined: his argument, in The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, that historical explanation applies the hypothetico-deductive method, and his suggestion in these works, which he has since amplified, that "most historical explanation" "as a matter of fact" employs situational logic.<sup>4</sup> It is argued that Popper's early advocacy of the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation is as much critical as constructive: various of his arguments in this connection are shown to be attempts to displace doctrines associated with claims for a distinctive logic of historical explanation. Popper's early analysis of historical explanation is bound up with his critique of anti-naturalistic historicism, and subsequent discussion of his early views has misrepresented

1. Popper's description of methodological individualism, PH, 157.

2. PH, p. 68.

3. See Chapter Six below.

4. OS, II, 265.

them by detaching them from their context. Popper's shifting usage of "trivial" to characterize the laws presupposed in historical explanations is examined: the two main senses in which he uses this term are shown not to be equivalent, and Popper's treatment of them as if they were is shown to lead to weaknesses in his account of historical explanation.

It is suggested that Popper limits the historian's field of interest to describing and explaining specific events as a barrier against historicist attempts to claim that past events exhibit patterns which license historical predictions. It is argued, against Popper's limitation of the historian's field of interest that the historian may well have an interest in formulating and using restricted generalizations, and that this interest does not conduce to what Popper objects to as historical prophecy.

Popper's statements on situational logic in four separate publications are examined. In The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, Popper relates situational logic to constructing models on the assumption that the agents acted rationally, as a basis for explaining how they did in fact act; such an assumption of rationality is shown not to be "trivial".<sup>1</sup> It is argued, further, that explanations of actions in terms of "the logic of the situation" may not be related to an assumption of rationality, or presuppose unrestricted generalizations in accordance with the hypothetico-deductive model. Popper's critique of Collingwood in a later publication<sup>2</sup> is considered, and his advocacy of situational logic is compared with Collingwood's views. Lastly, the use of situational analysis in a biography of Caesar is investigated, with a view to appraising the respective merits of Popper and Collingwood's views, and also for the purpose of evaluating Popper's attempt to dispense with empathic understanding in historical work. It is suggested that Popper is not altogether successful in this latter endeavour, and that room remains for a case to be made for empathic understanding as a necessary supplement to what Popper would consider to be a situational analysis of Caesar's actions.

1. As Popper says, OS, II, 265

2. "Historical Explanation: An Interview" Cambridge Opinion v.28(1962), pp. 21-22.

## II. Popper and the Vienna Circle

Popper's classic work on scientific method, Die Logik der Forschung, was published in Vienna in the days of the Vienna Circle<sup>1</sup>, and several of Popper's arguments in this book are directed against the "positivists" of the Vienna Circle<sup>2</sup> with whom he had considerable contact. Popper has always insisted on his differences from the Vienna Circle: he was never a member of the Vienna Circle; he was never a disciple of Wittgenstein; and he never accepted the touchstone of the Vienna Circle, the verification criterion of meaning.<sup>3</sup> There were, to be sure, logical positivists who were not members in any real sense of the Vienna Circle<sup>4</sup>; there were members of the Vienna Circle, such as Neurath, who were never followers of Wittgenstein; and the verification criterion of meaning, hailed in the early days as a modern Occam's razor, was soon seen to be as metaphysical as some of the ideas which it classed as meaningless.

Popper, in spite of his kinship with logical positivism, has presented himself as an original thinker in contingent contact with the Vienna Circle.<sup>5</sup> Others have thought Popper was considerably closer than he

1. Paul K. Feyerabend reports that

"It was Feigl's belief that an earlier publication of the Logik der Forschung or of some other abridged version of the 'Grundprobleme' (Die Logik der Forschung is an abridged version of an earlier manuscript of Popper's, "Die Beiden Grundprobleme der Erkenntnistheorie,") would have decisively changed the history of the Vienna Circle. 'We made a mistake,' said he, 'to choose Wittgenstein as our bible'. (Private communication to Karl R. Popper)"

(P.K. Feyerabend, "Herbert Feigl: a Biographical Sketch," Mind Matter and Method, essays in Philosophy and Science in honor of Herbert Feigl, ed. by P.K. Feyerabend and G. Maxwell (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1966) p. 7.)

2. See Chapter One below.

3. CR, 39-41, CR, 269

4. Cf. Joergen Joergenson's discussion of Logical Empiricism, pp. 45 ff., The Development of Logical Empiricism, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, vol. II no. 9 (Chicago, 1951).

5. CR, p. 36, 40-1, 254-5; cf. the following footnote.



allows to the Vienna Circle: while admitting that Popper entered his dissent strongly on certain points internal to logical positivism, they have classed Popper as fundamentally a logical positivist with idiosyncrasies. Otto Neurath described Popper's relationship to the Vienna Circle epigrammatically: Popper was its "official opposition"<sup>1</sup>. Rudolf Carnap wrote, in his review of Die Logik der Forschung in 1935, that

"By his efforts to characterize his position clearly [Popper] is led to overemphasize the differences between his views and those... which are most closely allied to his... [Popper] is very close indeed to the point of view of the Vienna Circle. In his presentation, the differences appear much greater than they are in fact." 2.

I do not want to go into the fine points of this dispute. For the purposes of considering Popper's ideas on history, there are three points of importance on which Popper shared the Vienna Circle's opposition to certain doctrines prevalent in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the claim that logic lacks autonomy and depends on psychology, or psychologism; the idea that the primary method of the "cultural sciences"<sup>3</sup> is *Verstehen* or the empathic understanding of other human beings; and the view that, for one reason or another, a gulf separates the natural sciences from the "cultural sciences".

1. CR, p. 269; Popper comments on this that he "was never so fortunate as to belong to" the Circle, by which he seems to mean that since he was not actually a member, he could not fulfil even such an official capacity as opposition..

2. In Erkenntnis, V(1935), pp. 290-4; cited by Popper, CR, p. 254, where he comments that

"This silenced me for many years....But I felt all the time that the differences between our views were far from being imaginary..." (CR, p. 254-55).

Carnap has recently reaffirmed his early view:

"[Popper's] basic philosophical attitude was quite similar to that of the Circle. However, he had a tendency to overemphasize our differences." (R. Carnap, "Intellectual Autobiography," Rudolf Carnap, Library of Living Philosophers (1963), p. 31)

3. I follow the translation of "*Geisteswissenschaften*" as "cultural sciences", as in the recent English translation of Rudolf Carnap, The Logical Structure of the World, trans. R.A. George (London, 1967), p. 39.

Popper attributes the term "psychologism" to Husserl<sup>1</sup>, but he uses the term rather differently from Husserl, in his discussion of the methods of history and the social sciences, to denote the view that sociology can be reduced to social psychology<sup>2</sup>. Psychologism, as Husserl used the term, is a reductionist view, often associated with classical empiricism, in which logic is considered to be a branch of psychology: the laws of logic were empirical generalizations about the way in which people think; according to John Stuart Mill, the principle of non-contradiction amounted to asserting that, as a matter of fact, two contradictory propositions cannot be maintained at the same time. Popper's shift in usage is understandable, for the development of mathematical logic since Husserl's time corroborated the autonomy of logic.

Psychologism in Husserl's sense is analogous to Verstehen in attributing the procedures of knowledge to human "inner life"; both doctrines make thought and knowledge relative to persons. The assertion that there is a method peculiar to the "cultural sciences", based on what might be loosely described as reverberations in the knower's psyche, is considered by some to entail a radical division between the "cultural sciences" and the natural sciences. Popper's critical stance to the variations played on this cluster of doctrines will be a recurrent theme in this thesis.

These three points which Popper shared with the Vienna Circle will be seen to be of importance in delimiting Popper's approach to history and its methods. But they do not exhaust the relevance of Popper's contact with the Vienna Circle for his ideas on history. It has been argued that the Vienna Circle's insistence on "scientific philosophy" limited their outlook on the social sciences quite severely. Pietro Rossi<sup>3</sup> has suggested that Popper's

1. OS, II, 323, note 19 to chapter 13; the term "psychologism" did not originate with Husserl, but was first used by J.E. Erdmann (M. Farber, The Foundation of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy (1943), p. 110.)

2. OS II, 88, 90, 91, 98.

3. Pietro Rossi, Storia e storicismo nella filosofia contemporanea (Lerici, Milan, 1960), pp. 405-440, in a chapter entitled "Karl Popper and the neo-positivist critique of historicism." What follows is a close paraphrase of Rossi's argument.



writings on history and historicism should be evaluated with regard to the self-imposed limitations in this respect of the Vienna Circle: for Popper, in Rossi's view, went quite far towards overcoming these limitations. Rossi argues that the classical doctrines of logical positivism put the social sciences and historiography outside the scope of the Vienna Circle: only logical-linguistic considerations were permitted, and certain problems were prohibited as nonsense. Rossi claims that the latter doctrine was a "biased rejection" of these problems, and that the former tenet excluded the critical instruments adequate and appropriate for these problems. The problems of "contemporary historicism" were beyond the self-imposed limitations of Vienna Circle.<sup>1.</sup>

Popper set aside both of these limitations, in his major contribution to the "liberalization" of logical positivism. He rejected the verification criterion of meaning, and defined "the range of empirical science on the basis of its methodological rules", rather than by logical-linguistic considerations. Examining Popper's works on history and the social sciences in chronological order, one can see

"the successive stages of the disengagement of logical positivism from its original program; and the acquisition of the capacity to handle questions which it had initially condemned, from its own viewpoint." 2.

Rossi evaluates the extent to which Popper "liberalized" the original programme of logical positivism, so as to permit an approach to the problems of "contemporary historicism", by comparing his ideas on history and the social sciences with those of Otto Neurath.<sup>3.</sup> Neurath's publications<sup>4.</sup> on

1. Rossi, p. 405

2. Rossi, p. 406. Rossi lists "What is Dialectic?" Mind, 1940, "The Poverty of Historicism," Economica, 1944, and The Open Society, 1945

3. Rossi, p. 434-5

4. The three publications of Neurath's which Rossi cites were published during and subsequent to the Vienna Circle's existence. But Neurath's earlier publications on the concept of the "war economy" might be quite different; for one thing, Neurath's ideas were shaped by Marxism as well as by logical positivism - Popper (PH, p. 103) calls Neurath a historicist.

the social sciences apply the standard doctrines of the Vienna Circle. He considers sociology and psychology in terms of the unity of science and physicalism, that is, behaviouristically: the problems and the language of the social sciences are to be modelled strictly on physics.

Neurath's physicalism is much more restrictive than Popper's use of the paradigm of physics: "ethical-juridical problems", which are central to Popper's Open Society, are eliminated by Neurath because they cannot be formulated in terms of experimental assertions.<sup>1</sup> Popper recognizes the distinct categories of nature and its testable theories, and of value and its conventions; the problems of the latter category cannot be reduced to matters soluble by the methods of the former, but it is, nevertheless, according to Popper, important to raise these problems and to see what can be said about their solutions, or lack of solutions, in the appropriate terms.<sup>2</sup>

Neurath's reductionist approach is "directly descended from the original position of the Vienna Circle," and his considerations of historiography and the social sciences reflect its limitations.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Popper broadened the narrow outlook of logical positivism, by his critique of logical positivism, and thus achieved a less "biased view" of the problems of history and the social sciences.

Rossi argues that Popper's criticism of historicism does not apply to what Rossi describes as "contemporary historicism", in which Dilthey and Weber are seminal figures. Rather, Popper's critique is directed against the historicism of the Romantic historical school: namely, against the reduction of the social sciences to historical knowledge, and historical knowledge to an intuitive understanding radically different from what occurs in the natural sciences; and against the supposed laws of historical development, on which speculative philosophies of history are generally based.<sup>4</sup>

1. Rossi, p. 434.

2. This point is not made explicitly by Rossi but it is related to his argument.

3. Rossi, p. 435

4. Rossi, p. 422.

These two sets of doctrines were the outcome of the post-Kantian development of idealism, in which there were "two main directions" of "interest in human action",

"detailed concrete history on the one hand, the philosophy of history on the other." 1.

"Contemporary historicism," as Rossi understands it, is not a continuation of romantic historicism, which was strongly influenced by Hegel.

"Contemporary German historicism" emerged in polemic against Hegel, and against the conception of the historical world formulated by Romantic culture.<sup>2</sup>

The "fundamental points of reference" for "contemporary historicism" are the "confrontation with positivism" beginning in the later nineteenth century, and the neo-critical development of Kantianism.<sup>3</sup> The aim of "contemporary German historicism" might be equated with that of critical philosophy of history: to establish the conditions for valid knowledge in the historical and the social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

Popper, although he is not sufficiently aware of it, has a considerable, if partial, solidarity with what Rossi calls "contemporary historicism". What Popper criticized as historicism supports this view, Rossi argues, for it was the romantic inheritance which the "contemporary historicists" wished to discard.<sup>5</sup> Popper's interest in the part played by hypotheses in historical work can be compared to the work of Weber: Weber went further in determining

"the particular functions which general rules and general concepts fulfil in historical work." 6.

Popper was limited in this direction because he retained, although in a somewhat altered form, the Vienna Circle's demand for

"a general model of scientific procedure, to which to relate, and on the basis of which to clarify the modes of operation of the various disciplines." 7.

1. Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action 2nd edition (Glencoe, III, 1949), p. 475

2. Rossi, pp. 14, 16.

3. Rossi, p. 14.

4. Rossi, p. 16.

5. Rossi, p. 420.

6. Rossi, p. 438.

7. Rossi, p. 439.



And further: while Popper's "polemical posture" in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society did not prevent him from putting forward constructive ideas partially converging with "contemporary historicism", it did impede him from recognizing the extent of his kinship with it.<sup>1</sup>

Rossi's interpretation of Popper's relation to the Vienna Circle is suggestive, but not all his suggestions need be adopted. In arguing that Popper "liberalized" the narrow outlook of the Vienna Circle with respect to history and the social sciences, it may be that Rossi takes Popper's utterances on his independent position vis-a-vis the Vienna Circle too much at face value; and this relation may not explain as much of Popper's rapprochement to "contemporary historicism" as Popper thinks it does. That is, Rossi takes Popper's rejection of the verification criterion as part of his contribution to the "liberalization" of logical positivism; but it was noted above that the verification criterion and the associated doctrine that certain problems were nonsense, were part of the early outlook of the Vienna Circle: the verification criterion was severely modified because it was unworkable and metaphysical.

Rossi argues for a progressive liberalization of logical positivism in the sequence of Popper's works because, in The Open Society and its Enemies, which was published last, in 1945, Popper shifts from a methodological to an ideological criticism of historicism as the doctrinal foundation of "contemporary totalitarianism".<sup>2</sup> But it can be argued that this angle of approach is in line with the Vienna Circle's objection to metaphysics as a cover for noxious social doctrines.<sup>3</sup>: Popper's

1. Rossi, p. 433, p. 439-40.

2. Rossi, p. 426. Cf. above, p. 11, note 1 for the sequence of Popper's works which Rossi considers, and the dates of their first publications.

3. According to Philipp Frank,

"The whole original Viennese group was convinced that the elimination of metaphysics not only was a question of a better logic but was of great relevance for social and cultural life. They were also convinced that the elimination of metaphysics would deprive the groups that we call today totalitarian of their scientific and philosophic basis and would lay bare the fact that these groups are actually fighting for special interests of some kind."

(P. Frank, Modern Science and its Philosophy Cambridge, Mass, 1949, p. 34)  
Otto Neurath, trained as a sociologist, and something of a Marxist, went further along this line than did the other members of the Circle.

ideas here might be viewed as a continuation of logical positivism, rather than a "liberalization".

That the Vienna Circle took little interest in the problems of the social sciences is indisputable. But because they were concerned with elaborating a comprehensive scientific outlook, they could not simply ignore the social sciences; problems of the social sciences were included in their outline of unitary science published as Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung der Wiener Kreis<sup>1</sup>. But except for Otto Neurath, the logical positivists' considerations of these problems were perfunctory.<sup>2</sup> But Neurath was a more interesting thinker than Rossi makes him appear. Although many of his later publications attempt to carry out consistent applications of characteristic doctrines of the Vienna Circle, such as physicalism, his views on the social sciences do not altogether derive from the tenets of logical positivism; they were also influenced by Neurath's interest in Marxism which Rossi neglects, and this latter factor accounts for certain views of Neurath's, which were not accepted by the other members of the Vienna Circle.

It may be also the case that Rossi misconstrues Popper's liberalization of logical positivism, and his partial convergence with the "contemporary historicism" descended from Dilthey and Weber. It will be suggested below, in considering Popper's views on historical explanation, that on occasion he borrows the terminology of those whom Rossi calls "contemporary historicists" in order to undermine their case.<sup>3</sup>

1. Or so accounts of this publication say; I have not been able to see a copy of it.

2. Cf. Rudolf Carnap, "Reply to Cohen," Rudolf Carnap, p. 865 on this point

3. Cf. below, Chapter Three, section VI for Popper's characterization of situational logic as a method of objective understanding (objective Verstehen): what Popper attempts to eliminate by means of this concept includes those conceptions of Verstehen which Dilthey and Weber would, respectively, defend as indispensable in history and the social sciences. (Cf. Max Weber, "The Interpretative Understanding of Social Action," in Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, ed. May Brodbeck (N.Y., 1968) pp. 19-33)

And there is a further problem to do with Popper's relation to historicisms. Rossi argues that what Popper criticizes is romanticist historicism, from which "contemporary historicism" is to be distinguished, but that Popper does not recognize his solidarity with "contemporary historicism", due to limitations in his terms of reference arising from his links with logical positivism. But this argument will not do. If what Popper criticizes as historicism is, as it has been unsympathetically described, "flogging a dead horse", why, as a philosopher, did he do so without checking for either lack of respiration or presence of putrefaction? I shall return to these and other questions in considering what Popper means by historicism.

There is another limitation to Rossi's approach still to be considered; more must be taken into account, in examining Popper's ideas on history, than either philosophic derivations or purely philosophical concerns. While Popper's position on empathic understanding carries on the Vienna Circle's rejection of this notion, Popper's broader lack of sympathy for the practice of history, insofar as it is not due simply to ignorance of what historians are trying to do, stems, it will be argued, from the individualism which is the central constituent of his liberalism, and this same individualism unifies his wide-sweeping critique of historicism as well. It will be argued that ethico-political concerns, as well as philosophical considerations, shape Popper's approach to history and historicism.

## Chapter One

## THE GENETIC FALLACY INVERTED:

Popper's Logic of Scientific Discovery Considered  
With Reference to his Later Ideas on History

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## I. Introduction

The object in this chapter is not to consider Popper's contribution, in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, to the philosophy of science. It is rather to examine the ideas that Popper sets forth in his first book, with reference to his ideas, published later, on history and social philosophy. Popper's critical philosophy of history is, professedly, an application of the epistemological and methodological ideas which he first developed in connection with the philosophy of science; and there are other respects in which The Logic of Scientific Discovery foreshadows and elucidates the ideas of The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and its Enemies, as I hope to specify.

Thus, the argument of this chapter might be described as a superficial paradox: that the ideas which Popper develops in criticism of traditional empiricism and logical positivism have ramifications which, in Popper's later publications, apply to those opponents whom he convicts of far more flagrant misdemeanours: the historicists.

A discussion of Popper's ideas from such an angle is, necessarily, neither a comprehensive nor a systematic treatment of his ideas on the philosophy of science; it is rather a selective and oblique study, based on criteria which are in some sense external to Popper's first book and the subjects treated therein.

If the genre of this exercise were considered to be intellectual history, it might be contended that it exemplifies in parts a narrative approach, which is expressed in narrative sentences linking Popper's later ideas with his earlier ones: e.g. that laws of historical development, extending to the future, suffer from many of the same difficulties as do inductively based scientific theories. If the genre of this endeavour is to be philosophy, its object and manner of execution might be thought illegitimate or irrelevant; for to examine Popper's ideas on the philosophy of science in the light of his ideas on history and social philosophy is not to raise the fundamental question of the validity of either

of these sets of ideas.

But it is perhaps a narrow conception of philosophy to see ideas as separable from their background. A more generous view would allow that providing a context, a historical background, is a useful fringe activity, helpful to the central concerns of philosophy. We will know better, from what end to consider the validity of Popper's ideas on history, if we understand their historical derivation as well as their logical relations. Popper would claim that this is a purely heuristic activity, to be relegated to the category of the psychology of knowledge, rather than that of the more important logic of knowledge; but the exclusion of my tactics from Popper's strict conception of epistemology does not prevent it from being a useful activity, subsidiary to philosophy. I shall have more to say on the distinction, fundamental in Popper's work on the philosophy of science, between the logic of knowledge and the psychology of knowledge.

An identification of the view which Popper opposes, in an argument, frequently leads to the heart of his contentions. The reason for this is connected with Popper's conception of philosophy as a critical activity<sup>1</sup>: in his practice, this often means that he constructs his positive proposals in the course of criticizing doctrines which he opposes; the linkage should be preserved, I think, in an exposition of Popper's arguments.

In The Logic of Scientific Discovery, the main opposition is:  
"the traditional view that empirical science starts from perception";

"that we begin by collecting and arranging our experiences,  
and so ascend the ladder of science";

and that

"perceptual experience must be the sole 'source of knowledge' of all the empirical sciences....(and) that science is merely an attempt to classify and describe this perceptual knowledge, these immediate experiences whose truth we cannot doubt...." 2.

1. Discussed below, Chapter VI.

2. LSD, pp. 97, 106, 94.

The substantial issue raised in Popper's book is whether perceptual experience can be taken as the basis for empirical science; the methodological techniques which he opposes and proposes are associated with this question of whether a satisfactory basis can be found for science. Popper's contention is that neither the basis nor the conclusions of science are definitive; rather, the methods by which they are obtained are objective. His criticisms, and positive proposals, are based on these contentions.

It seems to me that one can be led astray, in interpreting Popper, by the amount of space that he devotes to criticizing methodologically misconceived techniques, in that these may appear to be what is at issue. These techniques are associated with bases: inductive logic with the basis of perceptual experience; alleged historical laws with the anti-naturalistic social ontology of historicism that Popper delineates in the first part of The Poverty of Historicism.<sup>1</sup> Reference to the basis links the seemingly disparate topics which Popper criticizes, as I hope to show in this instance with regard to the philosophy of science: the principle of induction, the divagations of the psychology of knowledge and the verification criterion of meaning are all associated with taking perceptual experience as a basis for science: conversely, Popper in rejecting such a basis, and indeed any fixed basis for science, restricts epistemological discussion to the logic of knowledge, and makes methodology a matter of decisions as to conventions.

In traditional empiricism, perceptual experience is organized by means of the principle of induction, which is, Popper thinks, one of the major stumbling blocks of this view of empirical science; in the refurbished empiricism of the logical positivists, the verification criterion of meaning is the principle by which empirical science is constituted. Both induction and verification, with their basis in perceptual experience, are, Popper argues, misconceived; he recommends a falsifiability criterion of

1. The validity of Popper's connection of the technique of historicist prophecy with the anti-naturalistic basis is examined below in Chapter Four.



demarcation, which can succeed, he claims, where the preceding failed, in distinguishing scientific theories from metaphysical views: the latter may be meaningful, but are certainly <sup>not</sup> falsifiable, as are theories in empirical science.

It is interesting to note that Popper, in his retroactive construction of his intellectual autobiography, says that he did not develop his views "originally as a criticism of Wittgenstein", but rather, independently:

"In fact I had formulated the problem of demarcation and the falsifiability or testability criterion in the autumn of 1919, years before Wittgenstein's views became a topic of discussion in Vienna. (Cf. my paper 'Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report', now in my Conjectures and Refutations.) This explains why, as soon as I heard of the Circle's new verifiability criterion of meaning, I contrasted this with my falsifiability criterion - a criterion of demarcation designed to demarcate systems of scientific statements from perfectly meaningful systems of metaphysical statements." 1.

That is, Popper claims that, unlike many members of the Vienna Circle, he was not an epigone of Wittgenstein, but an independent and original thinker. He credits himself with conceiving his major, and most influential ideas at the age of seventeen, in the winter of 1919-20. In his historical note to The Poverty of Historicism, Popper writes that

"the fundamental thesis of this book - that the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition, and that there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational methods - goes back to the winter of 1919-20." 2.

The year 1919 seems to have been something of an annus mirabilis for Popper. The context for his mental activity was the end of the Habsburg Empire. In his essay, "Philosophy of Science: a personal report," he writes:

"After the collapse of the Austrian Empire there had been a revolution in Austria: the air was full of revolutionary slogans and ideas, and new and often wild theories. Among the theories which interested me Einstein's theory of relativity was no doubt by far the most important. Three others were Marx's theory of history, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Alfred Adler's so-called 'individual psychology'.  
"There was a lot of popular nonsense talked about these theories...  
...during the summer of 1919...I began to feel more and more

1. LSD, p.312

2. PH, iv.



more dissatisfied with...the Marxist theory of history, psycho-analysis, and individual psychology; and I began to feel dubious about their claims to scientific status. ...I felt that [they]...had in fact rather more in common with primitive myths than with science...." 1.

Popper goes on to tell of an experience with Alfred Adler, which "much impressed" him:

"Once, in 1919, I reported to him a case which to me did not seem particularly Adlerian, but which he found no difficulty in analysing in terms of his theory of inferiority feelings, although he had not even seen the child. Slightly shocked, I asked him how he could be so sure. 'Because of my thousand-fold experience,' whereupon I could not help saying: 'And with this new case, I suppose, your experience has become thousand-and-one-fold.'" 2.

The difference which Popper discovered, between Einstein's theory of relativity, and the pseudo-scientific theories of Marx, Adler and Freud, is that Einstein's theory "is incompatible with certain possible results of observation", whereas the others

"were compatible with the most divergent human behaviour, so that it might be impossible to describe any human behaviour that might not be claimed to be a verification of these theories." 3.

The conclusion to which Popper came, at the age of seventeen, in the winter of 1919-20, was that no theory was scientific by virtue of the quantity of its confirmations; confirmations which are easily come by are of little scientific worth. Not everything is permitted by a scientific theory; what is crucial is that it prohibits certain events which, if they occur, would refute the theory. Irrefutable theories are not scientific; a scientific theory is tested by attempting to falsify or refute it. It is falsifiability which provides the criterion of demarcation between theories which are scientific and those which are not. 4.

1. Reprinted in Conjectures and Refutations under the title, "Science: Conjectures and Refutations", p. 34.

2. "Science: Conjectures and Refutations," CR p. 34.

3. Ibid., p. 35.

4. Ibid., p. 36-37.

Popper argues that his proposal is more than a simple setting of verification on its head. Confirmation and falsification are significantly asymmetric: scientific theories involve universal statements, and these can never be deduced from singular statements, although they may be refuted by singular statements.

One way in which Popper states this conclusion, in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, is that scientific theories cannot be inferred by means of the principle of induction. The principle of induction makes just the claim which Popper has dismissed as untenable: that there is some means whereby universal statements, such as natural laws, can emerge from a collection of singular statements; but an apparent convergence of the particular events described by such statements cannot be extrapolated. In this negative result as to how valid laws may be grounded, Popper's criticism of empiricism in The Logic of Scientific Discovery parallels his critique of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and its Enemies in that both derive from the same insight, that certain proposed derivations of laws are untenable.

There are further similarities between Popper's analysis of science and the practice of History as understood by professional historians, and these resemblances will emerge in my exposition of some of the central topics of The Logic of Scientific Discovery. I shall begin with what can be only awkwardly described as a meta-meta-discussion of Popper's distinction between the logic of knowledge and the psychology of knowledge. After considering Popper's conception of methodology, I shall then examine more specific issues: scientific theories, falsifications, causal explanation and probability. In the last section of this chapter I shall consider whether Popper's image of science in The Logic of Scientific Discovery is as unlike the practice of history as Popper contends in the last chapter of The Open Society.

## II. The Logic of Knowledge and the Psychology of Knowledge

The distinction which Popper draws, between the logic of knowledge and the psychology of knowledge, is related to the substantial issue which, it was argued above, is at the heart of Popper's argument in The Logic of Scientific Discovery: whether perceptual experience is a satisfactory basis for empirical science; and, if it is not, how the starting point for empirical science ought to be chosen, and what the working procedures of empirical science are.

The psychology of knowledge describes the attributes of knowledge as seen by those who maintain that perceptual experience can provide a sound basis for science. The logic of knowledge excludes these attributes from the theory of knowledge relating to Popper's conception of empirical science.

Popper's view of science is that its theories, irrevocably tentative, are tested by means of the logical relation of deduction, which is objective, and falsified by singular existential statements, statements, that is

"which assert that an observable event is occurring in a certain individual region of space and time" 1.

By referring to observability, in basic statements, rather than to observations, Popper argues, it is possible to avoid the subjective reference to perceptual experience which vitiates traditional empiricism.<sup>2</sup> Empirical science is thus both objective and tentative.

This view, according to Popper, leads away from the blind alleys, such as the principle of induction, which the basis of perceptual experience cannot escape. Traditional empiricism is a subjective view: its conception of knowledge refers to what Popper considers to be psychological factors, irrelevant to significant features of knowledge in empirical science.

1. LSD, p. 103.

2. This argument is developed in more detail below, pp. 243



The psychology of knowledge "deals with empirical facts"<sup>1</sup>: the process, often described as inspiration, whereby new ideas are conceived; or the subjective feeling of conviction which may motivate someone to uphold an idea. This latter factor lies behind the plausibility of the principle of induction: an observer, experiencing the repeated occurrence of natural events, may become convinced that the series may be extrapolated into the future, without any grounds for his belief beyond his perceptual experience. But according to Popper, empirical science is not constituted in this fashion; an inductive inference from experience is of little value to empirical science.

What is significant for empirical science is what Popper describes as the logic of knowledge, which deals with the logical relations between statements, and the consequent methods whereby hypotheses can be tested. The psychological facets of knowledge may be relevant to the conception of new ideas, but they play no part in the testing to which new ideas must be subjected, if they are to be worthy of serious consideration, in empirical science.

In the terms of Popper's distinction, Kekule's vision, while on a London bus, of a particular chemical molecule, hitherto problematical, as a snake biting its tail, is a fascinating empirical fact of the psychology of knowledge, but irrelevant to the testing of the model which Kekule proposed, as a result of his vision. The more prosaic testing of Kekule's insight relies on means within the province of the logic of knowledge.

The psychology of knowledge sheds no light on what it is that makes a theory scientific rather than metaphysical, for the conception of a theory is irrelevant to its category. Yet this question of demarcation, of the criterion for distinguishing a scientific theory from a metaphysical one is in Popper's eyes at the heart of the problem of identifying empirical science.<sup>2</sup> The logic of knowledge, unlike the psychology of knowledge, is

1. LSD, p.30; pp.30-32, for what follows.

2. LSD, p.34-9; cf. CR, p.39, 196-7, 256.

relevant to just this question: the logical relations between statements, which are its province, provide a means for objective testing of scientific theories. A theory is refuted if consequences deduced from it are falsified by singular existential statements: e.g., a theory of the British weather, if such were possible, would be refuted, if a prediction of a clear day were deduced, and falsified by a persistent drizzle that concealed whether the sun actually rose on the appointed day.

This difference in the respective roles of these aspects of knowledge, psychological and logical, is what justifies, in Popper's eyes, the sharp distinction that he draws between them, and his restriction of the theory of knowledge, as it relates to empirical science, to the logic of knowledge.

Such a delimitation of epistemology is perhaps not so much of a tautology as Popper makes it appear, on his terms: it could be argued that the process of conceiving new ideas - inspiration - can be approached from more than the angle of empirical fact. A psychological theory might give a "qualitative" description of "inspiration" which does not entail that new ideas can be manufactured according to its recipes; if new ideas are considered to be the result of a figurative crossing of wires, this does not mean that one can preconceive which wires will cross fruitfully. But it may be that Popper restricts the psychology of knowledge to empirical facts because he thinks that the endeavour to analyse inspiration holds forth the temptation of foolproof recipes for new ideas, which Popper thinks an unpleasant impossibility.

But such considerations might be considered niggling, for Popper's distinction appears to work fairly straightforwardly in the natural sciences. Popper's use of it, with regard to history and the social sciences, is perhaps more questionable: here Popper's exclusion of the psychology of knowledge leads him to relegate any re-enactment approach to human action to a heuristic prelude of empirical research. It may be obvious that Kekule's vision is irrelevant to the worth of his proposal for empirical science, but it is not so clear that considering the episode of Kekule's discovery in the history of science, it is purely heuristic to have some notion of

what it is like to see a vision of a snake biting its tail, while struggling with a scientific problem.

Many historians and theorists of history have thought that there is a *prima facie* case for including "psychological" aspects of knowledge, in the analysis of historical knowledge. The argument is that the student of human beings has an advantage over the student of other topics in that the former has some experience of what it is like to be a human being<sup>1</sup>; and, he has had, moreover, particular experiences, which apparently are analogous to some experiences of his subjects. In comparatively prosaic terms, these are the rudiments of an empathetic approach to comprehending human action.<sup>2</sup>

Popper, however, translates his distinction between the logic and the psychology of knowledge, to history and the social sciences, without making much allowance for possible shifts within the new field of application, which might affect the distinction, in ways that I have suggested above. He extends his distinction between the logic and the psychology of knowledge, in his argument against the *prima facie* case for empathetic understanding; Popper's situational logic, by eliminating "psychologism" and allegedly related views from the analysis of human action, is an attempt to exclude re-enactment approaches from historical explanation.<sup>3</sup>

In proposing situational logic, Popper argues that human nature is unsatisfactory as a basis for the social sciences, in ways that are analogous to the defects of perceptual experience as a basis for empirical science. The results derived from both bases are subjective: perceptual experience is the property of the observer; insight into a person's motives is not easily made public, and this is one of the conditions of knowledge, according to Popper. There is a further, perhaps looser, analogy

1. Hayek makes this contention, in The Counter-Revolution of Science, pp. 25-35.

2. Cf. below, Chapter Three, for further discussion and illustration of this point.

3. See Chapter Three below.



between the defects of these two proposed bases. Neither perceptual experience nor psychological data can provide an adequate basis for natural or social science respectively, because in the first case the theories of natural science transcend any collection of supporting data drawn from perceptual experience, and in the second case, as will be seen below, Popper argues that the fundamental problems of sociological theory cannot be explained in psychological terms.<sup>1</sup>

The extent to which Popper's later work on history is a transfer of his ideas in The Logic of Scientific Discovery can be seen by considering a term which he introduces in his discussion of the psychology of knowledge: "psychologism", the epitome of the subjective defects of the psychology of knowledge. One fairly constant theme in Popper's analysis of scientific knowledge is the need to eliminate psychologism; he frequently demonstrates that his proposals are not open to this charge.

A reconstruction of Popper's conception of psychologism, from what he says in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, shows that it involves two major components: first, the claim that the psychology of knowledge, investigating the processes of conceiving new ideas, is relevant to the analysis of scientific knowledge; second, a view of the empirical basis which is associated with the psychology of knowledge, namely,

"The doctrine that the empirical sciences are reducible to sense-perceptions, and thus to our experiences..." 2.

and hence that the empirical sciences are justified on the subjective grounds of our convictions as to our experiences.

The correlation of these two doctrines is that both take as fundamental, respectively, the creative processes of the thinker, and the perceptions of the observer; both are subjective: both refer to what cannot be exhibited publicly and examined rationally.

1. See Chapter Three, below.

2. LSD, p. 93

Popper's contention is that neither of these doctrines is relevant to the epistemological analysis of science. He does not consider that the claim to reconstruct the private, creative experiences of another person can be valid; the impossibility of this endeavour puts its material beyond the bounds of empirical science, whose results are to be "inter-subjectively testable".

Very broadly, Popper extrapolates his argument against this claim, in his rejection of empathetic understanding in the social sciences as methodologically unsound.<sup>1</sup>

The flaw in taking perceptual experience to constitute a basis for empirical science is a logical difficulty: experiences cannot justify inter-subjectively valid statements, and scientific theories are composed of such statements. That experiences cannot justify inter-subjectively valid statements is what constitutes the problem of induction: countless experiences of sunrises will not suffice to ensure that the sun will rise tomorrow. The universal terms in which scientific theories are couched cannot be pulled like rabbits out of some mysterious and fortunately magical properties of perceptual experience.

The root problem, then, is how scientific theories are to be removed from limbo; if they are not to be accepted dogmatically, it would seem as if they must be justified, either by "reasoned argument, in the logical sense"<sup>2</sup>, and to justify all statements thus would lead to an infinite

1. See the discussion of the ramifications of Popper's usage of psychologism in Chapter Three, section iii in particular. In making a case for situational logic as a method of objective understanding, Popper argues that psychological "springs of action" must be excluded from situational logic "on principle". Popper's argument that it is impossible to reconstruct the private creative experiences of another person may be thought to lend support to this principle. But this argument does not establish the principle which Popper seems to defend, that situational logic must dispense with psychological "springs of action" as such; for it is argued below (Chapter Three, section vii) that there are psychological "springs of action" whose attribution is open to inter-subjective examination.

2. LSD, p. 93.



regress; or by perceptual experience, which on Popper's account is an unsatisfactory basis for logical reasons.

Popper cuts this Gordian knot by asserting that we cannot ultimately justify scientific statements, because there is no means of making them certain for all time. We must learn to live with scientific theories as tentative but testable: testable, rather than justifiable, and tentative, because if theories are to be scientific, then they must be falsifiable.

This digression into the problem behind psychologism - whether the statements of empirical science can be justified - is relevant to one of the main theses of this Chapter. Popper's image of science, in its large outlines, bears some similarity to the view of history which is held by many professional historians and theorists of history as well. According to this view, the results of historical research are always open to revision, but the procedures of historical research can be followed, and checked, by persons other than the historian proposing an interpretation. Perhaps the process whereby he conceived his interpretation cannot be reconstructed, but the question of its validity, its relation to the evidence, can be examined. An historical interpretation is a conjecture which may be overthrown if it is found not to jibe with the evidence.

Here the broad lines of the similarity of Popper's image of science to the professional historian's picture of history diverge: the procedure whereby an interpretation is falsified is not analogous, in all its details, to the experimental testing and potential refutation of a scientific theory. In testing a theory, an experimenter can have some control of the conditions; he can hope to isolate a crucial factor, in order to investigate its behaviour. Moreover, his experimental results are useful for the purpose of testing scientific theories, if it is at least theoretically possible for others to reproduce his experiments. It is difficult to see how these conditions can be fulfilled, or even applied, to historical evidence. But it is possible to argue that interpretations of historical evidence are open to criticism in ways that are analogous, if not precisely similar

to the testing of scientific theories. In the first place, not all scientific theories are, or can be, tested by controlled experiments. They may be tested by comparing what can be deduced from such a theory with further evidence, or they may be tested by further analysis of the evidence available to those proposing the theory; and something like this latter mode of criticism is perhaps most frequently used in criticizing historical interpretations.<sup>1.</sup>

When historians argue that it is possible to use evidence, so to speak, scientifically, discovering what really happened with the aid of an untruthful or inaccurate witness, implicit in their argument is a re-enactment approach, a reference to experience and understanding of human nature. In extracting the events of the past from the mouth of a misleading witness, the historian attempts to reconstruct something of his witness's mentality,<sup>2.</sup> on the basis of the available evidence, in order to see why he said what he did, and also, what he did not say.

By this means the historian can, as he must if history is not to be scissors-and-paste, pass beyond the literal content of the available evidence. In studying documents in this way the historian is, in a broad sense, making semantical investigations:<sup>3.</sup> he is considering the documents

1. Cf. below, Chapter Four, on History, where the argument that historical interpretations are not "circular" because they are open to criticism is developed at greater length.

2. Of course, disciplines auxiliary to history are used in investigating documents, but the distinction may be drawn, as by C.V. Langlois and C. Seignobos in their classic manual (Introduction to The Study of History, trans. C.G. Berry, London, 1912) between the external and internal criticism of documents: external criticism is the attempt to establish the authenticity and provenance of a doctrine; internal criticism attempts to determine its significance. It is the latter kind of criticism which is relevant to my argument.

3. It has been argued that psycho-analysis is a semantical activity in a similar sense, and that this view undercuts the controversy as to whether psycho-analysis is inadequate as an experimental science, employing causal explanations. (See Charles Rycroft, "Introduction: Causes and Meaning," in Psycho-analysis Observed, ed. C. Rycroft (London, 1966), pp. 14ff.



as meaningful communications, and interpreting them by means of other evidence, combined with his knowledge of human nature,<sup>1</sup> applied to the specific documents at hand.

But such a conception of the use of historical evidence is hors de combat, if it is agreed that psychologism, as Popper conceives it, must be excluded from history and the social sciences, for the outcome of this decision is to prohibit a re-enactment approach to the criticism of historical documents. If Popper is correct in contending that references to human nature are of little explanatory force, then it is difficult to find grounds for any serious internal criticism of historical evidence, with a view to conceiving tentative interpretations open to refutation. Yet this sort of criticism of historical evidence, founded on a knowledge of human nature, and operating through an attempt to grasp something of the witnesses' mentality, is accepted among historians as a legitimate enterprise, which is open to examination.

It would seem, then that there is some similarity between Popper's image of science, and a professional historian's view of history. Yet, following this line of argument, it seems surprising that Popper does not extend his positive conceptions to history and the social sciences, as readily as he does his negative ones.

Flagrant faults such as psychologism appear in some conceptions of natural science which Popper opposes, and are prevalent in the social sciences. But historical statements are beyond the criterion of demarcation that separates theories of empirical science from non-empirical theories; historical interpretations, as Popper insists in his later works, are rarely testable. Yet, it can be argued that historical work possesses procedures of testing and falsification which bear an analogy to those procedures in the natural sciences, which is little looser than the analogy that Popper constructs between psychologism in the natural and in the social sciences.

1. A historian may on occasions formulate his knowledge of human nature in terms of generalizations, but it is argued below, with respect to the historical study of Julius Caesar, that not all the historian's assertions about human nature and human beings can be brought under general laws.



It has been suggested, in the preceding pages, that Popper, in criticizing psychologism in history and the social sciences, and in contending that testability is for the most part absent from historical work, does not extend his conceptions sufficiently to allow them to fit their new subjects, and that these persistently narrowed<sup>1</sup> conceptions reinforce each other, in making history appear, in Popper's argument, to be something less than an empirical science: e.g., the elimination of psychologism removes with it the grounds for criticism in the use of historical evidence. These narrow conceptions, which provide such an apparently incisive critique, miss the mark, for the same reasons.

### III. Methodology

Methodology, according to Popper in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, is common to both the natural and the social sciences; there is no frontier, analogous to the demarcation between empirical science and metaphysics, which separates the natural from the social sciences. In so far as the latter have a valid contribution to make to knowledge, it is subject to the same methodological requirements as in the natural sciences.

Much of what Popper writes on methodology, in The Open Society and especially in The Poverty of Historicism, presupposes the conception of methodology which Popper presents in The Logic of Scientific Discovery.<sup>2</sup>

1. The claim that Popper's conception of psychologism is narrow might seem ill-at-ease with my later argument (Chapter Three) that Popper uses his conception of psychologism diffusely. My later objection is that Popper defines psychologism quite precisely as the view that sociology can be reduced to social psychology, but then proceeds to apply this term more loosely to various non-reductionist uses of psychology. This looser usage is what I have argued above is a narrow application of Popper's views on the methods of the natural sciences.

2. LSD, p. 51.

Popper develops his view of methodology by criticizing two views to which he is opposed: the positivist view that the natural sciences have no need of a theory of method, and the conventionalist view that scientific theories are no more than mental constructions of theorists. I shall argue that Conventionalism is not logically committed to all the faults which Popper ascribes to it, and that Popper's views can be fairly characterized as a moderate Conventionalism.

One sector of the opposition, as Popper sees it, to his conception of methodology, is the positivist, who I think can be taken to be both a traditional positivist or a logical positivist:

"The positivist dislikes the idea that there should be meaningful problems outside the field of 'positive' empirical science - problems to be dealt with by a genuine philosophical theory. He dislikes the idea that there should be a genuine theory of knowledge, an epistemology or a methodology." 1.

Popper sees the implications of this dispute about epistemology and methodology as extending to the "controversial question whether philosophy exists, or has any right to exist."<sup>2</sup>.

Popper turns the positivist objection inside out: he argues that it cannot be taken as primitive that empirical science is "meaningful"; to rest on a criterion of meaning is a sterile and misleading dogma. The proper question, says Popper, is that of demarcation: what distinguishes empirical science from metaphysics, which is meaningful in its own way. There is no watertight characterization of empirical science obtainable from "the formal or logical structure of its statements"<sup>3</sup>. What can contribute to answering the question of the distinctiveness of natural science is a theory of method; after examining the loopholes in other characterizations of empirical science, Popper proposes that:

"empirical science should be characterized by its methods: by our manner of dealing with scientific systems: by what we do with them and what we do to them." 4.

1. LSD, p. 51  
3. LSD, p. 50

2. LSD, p. 51  
4. LSD, p. 50

The conception bears some resemblance, but only some, to pragmatic and instrumentalist views of science. How Popper's view differs from these can be seen in his exposition of the methods that characterize empirical science.

In Popper's argument for the relevance of a theory of method, the opposition came from the claim of traditional empiricism that the method of induction, in empirical science, was so unproblematical as to eliminate the need for a theory of method; the tradition was maintained, in the logical positivists' acceptance of the verification criterion of meaning.

Once the need for a theory of method is accepted, a new opposition appears: the Conventionalist view of methods. Popper thinks that, in a certain sense, scientific methods have the character of conventions, but not in the sense of the Conventionalist.

Conventionalism, in the philosophy of science, has had some notable advocates: Poincare, Duhem, and Eddington.<sup>1</sup> The position that they have taken starts, in Popper's summary, from doubting that the simplicity described by scientific laws can legitimately be imputed to the multifariousness of the world as it appears to us. The argument is similar to, but more extreme than, Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena:

"For the conventionalist, theoretical natural science is not a picture of nature, but merely a logical construction. It is not the properties of the world which determine this construction: on the contrary it is this construction which determines the properties of an artificial world: a world of concepts implicitly defined by the natural laws which we have chosen. It is only this world of which science speaks.

"According to this conventionalist point of view, laws of nature are not falsifiable by observation; for they are needed to determine what an observation and, more especially, what a scientific measurement is." 2.

In some respects, Popper's view of natural science would appear to resemble that of the Conventionalist: he contends that scientific laws

1. LSD, p. 78

2. LSD, p. 79



are not, indeed cannot be, read off from nature, but must arise from bold guesses put forward for testing by attempts to falsify their logical consequences. Yet Popper differs from the Conventionalist, as Popper portrays him, in that Popper is closer to Kant, from whom Conventionalism may be said to derive. For Popper,

"our guesses are guided by the unscientific, the metaphysical  
...faith in laws, in regularities..."

"a faith...without which practical action is hardly conceivable". 1.

It could be argued that the Conventionalist goes beyond Popper in applying Occam's razor to this metaphysical inheritance from Kant. But Popper's presentation and criticism of Conventionalism is along lines different from, and perhaps incompatible with, such an argument.

The starting point for Popper's critique of Conventionalism can be found in his "supreme" methodological rule,

"the rule which says that the other rules of scientific procedure  
must be designed in such a way that they do not protect any  
statement in science against falsification." 2.

Popper's critique of Conventionalism is convincing, in so far as it indicates specific ways in which Conventionalism conflicts with this rule.

Popper presents his critique of Conventionalism in a sequence of three objections. First, Popper argues that the view that scientific laws are mere conventions leads to a subjective construction of science. Second, Popper claims that the Conventionalist seeks final certainty for science, and lastly, Popper alleges that the Conventionalist employs ad hoc hypotheses in his attempt to obtain definitive results. These three failings are in marked contrast to the view of scientific method which Popper advocates, wherein scientific work is both objective and tentative, and ad hoc hypotheses are excluded by rigorous testing. Whether Conventionalism is indeed subject to these failings will be discussed below. I shall also consider Popper's criticisms of specific methodological items in Conventionalism, which have repercussions in Popper's ideas on history.

The view that scientific laws are conventions does not escape the flaw

1. LSD, p. 278

2. LSD, p. 54

that characterized the view that scientific laws are based on perceptual experience: for both views, scientific theories are, irremediably, subjectively shaped; to Popper, such views are blind alleys, away from empirical science.

According to Popper, Conventionalism entails the view that the aim of science is to achieve final certainty, a conception which is incompatible with Popper's contention that the results of science are forever tentative. To strive for final certainty seems inconsistent with a subjective basis for scientific theories - "in the mind," in a packed phrase<sup>1</sup>. - but Popper's objection to the supposed Conventionalist view of the aims of science is not very convincing, for other reasons.

Popper claims that the difference between his view and that of the Conventionalist is that, for the latter, the aim of science is to obtain final certainty, whereas Popper is satisfied with severely tested tentative results.<sup>2</sup> To obtain definitive results, the Conventionalist introduces ad hoc hypotheses that save his scientific theories from Herbert Spencer's tragedy - being falsified by a fact.

Popper's argument is that the Conventionalist implements his central quest for final certainty by means of ad hoc measures that save his theories from the need for modification. Nevertheless it seems possible, to me, to adopt Conventionalism as a self-contained, consistently sceptical view of science, which is coherent without need of the imputed aim of final certainty: one could be a conventionalist and deny this latter view, for the crux of the matter lies in the view of scientific laws as conventions, and not in the belief in final certainty. The pursuit of final certainty can be shown to be consistent with viewing scientific theories as conventions, but it is not entailed by this latter conception.

Conventionalism, in the outline traced by Popper, passes from doubting

1. These quotation marks do not indicate that this is a citation from Popper.
2. LSD, p.80.



that the simplicity of scientific laws can be an attribute of things as they exist, to implementing an aim of final certainty for empirical science; and this seems a considerable volte-face.<sup>1</sup> The involutions of Popper's portrayal of Conventionalism are perhaps characteristic of Popper's presentation of those doctrines that he opposes - an interesting ramification of his critical approach - the student of Popper's ideas on history is reminded of the insidious ways in which historicism manifests itself in the social sciences.

Popper's objection to the conception of the aims of science which he ascribes to Conventionalism is less cogent than his criticism of methodological aspects of Conventionalism. The practice mentioned above, of introducing ad hoc hypotheses to save a theory - a significant feature of Conventionalism for Popper - may be distinguished from the question of whether such a device contributes, albeit speciously, to an aim of final certainty for science.

The addition to ad hoc hypotheses is chief among the "conventionalist stratagems," against which Popper warns in The Logic of Scientific Discovery. The "four main conventionalist stratagems" cast doubt on whether a clear-cut distinction between falsifiable and non-falsifiable theories can be made, by introducing ad hoc hypotheses, modifying the "so-called 'ostensive definitions'", systematically doubting the reliability of crucial and potentially falsifying experiments, and lastly the rather mysterious stratagem, that "in the last resort we can always cast doubt on the acumen of the theorist."<sup>2</sup> Popper does not "claim completeness" for his list of "the four main conventionalist stratagems":

"it must be left to the investigator, especially in the fields of sociology and psychology (the physicist may hardly need the warning) to guard constantly against the temptation to employ new conventionalist stratagems - a temptation to which psycho-analysts, for instance, often succumb." 3.

1. Although there are other instances of similar paradoxes in doctrines.

2. LSD, p. 81.

3. LSD, p. 82. Most of Popper's few mentions of the social sciences, in LSD, are to indicate specious arguments of the conventionalist genre: e.g., p. 50, Popper comments with regard to conventionalist arguments of the sort characterized above, "that similar arguments abound in the field of the social sciences."



These arguments against the introduction of ad hoc hypotheses elucidate what appears to me a compressed argument in Popper's Poverty of Historicism:

"...it is an important postulate of scientific method that we should search for laws with an unlimited realm of validity. If we were to admit laws that are themselves subject to change, change could never be explained by laws. It would be the admission that change is simply miraculous. And it would be the end of scientific progress; for if unexpected observations were made, there would be no need to revise our theories: the ad hoc hypothesis that the laws have changed would 'explain' everything." 1.

Popper's argument is specifically against the notion that there can be generalizations, confined to historical periods, operative in historical laws; and implicitly, he is stating his case that historical explanations presuppose generalizations of unrestricted validity, according to his hypothetico-deductive model of causal explanation.<sup>2</sup> The grounds for Popper's objection to the introduction of ad hoc hypotheses, which are only alluded to in this passage, can be appreciated in the light of his critique of Conventionalism in The Logic of Scientific Discovery.

Whether an addiction to a deus ex machina in the form of ad hoc hypotheses is a besetting sin of the methodology of Conventionalism is perhaps not as clear as Popper makes it appear. In some respects, Conventionalism appears to be something of an idealized bogey, an opponent against whose stratagems we must defend ourselves. If Popper's image of the scientist is Faustian,<sup>3</sup> always striving to falsify, then it must be supplemented with

1. PH, p.103 Popper cites LSD, sec.79, in his note to this passage in PH. I shall have more to say on Popper's methodological postulate of "the invariance of natural laws", which he mentions in his footnote, PH,103 in the following section on scientific theories. It seems to me that Popper's presentation of his argument in LSD, sec.79, derives from his critique of Conventionalism; in particular from Popper's retention of the Kantian faith discussed above, p.335.

2. A case which is criticized below, Chapter Two.

3. Popper's fallibilism might be taken as a gloss on Goethe:

"es irrt der Mensch so lang' er strebt".

In particular support of Popper's Faustian view of science, the concluding section in LSD, "The path of Science", p. 281.

"The wrong view of science betrays itself in the craving to be right; for it is not his possession of knowledge, of irrefutable truth, that makes the man of science, but his persistent and recklessly critical quest for truth..." Cf. also the Final Section to this Chapter, p. ~~284~~ 52-3

some mention of the doctrines open to exploitation by Mephistopheles: in this instance, the extreme version of Conventionalism, wherein the stratagems of ad hoc hypotheses flourish. But there are more moderate forms of Conventionalism, such as Popper's own view.

If Popper is less Conventionalist for being more Kantian<sup>1</sup>, nevertheless the notion of convention cannot be eliminated from a discussion of his conception of methodology. Popper regards methodological rules as conventions, "for the most part conventions of a fairly obvious kind"<sup>2</sup>. The procedures by which they are formulated is that proposals are made, and decisions reached on the proposals; a convention is an agreement on the proposals. Decisions as to conventions should be supported by rational arguments in their favour, which take the form of analyzing the "logical consequences" of proposals, "to point out their fertility".<sup>3</sup>

The key words in Popper's characterization of methodology are: proposals, decisions, and conventions. Popper's conception of methodology and how it involves decisions is analogous to the existentialist argument for the necessity of choosing in a world that will not supply the answers, gratis. Both views start from the claim that one must opt on crucial matters where answers cannot be elicited from the surrounding world. Popper's view of methodology might be characterized as an existentialist view without the nausea; anxiety is needless, because rational arguments in support of one's proposals, displace it.<sup>4</sup>

Popper's view of methodology can be compared with what he recommends for history. The analogy is that both represent a moderate conventionalism. Popper argues that writing history requires selecting a preconceived point of view from which to interpret the overwhelming mass of material; it is inevitably somewhat arbitrary; and it is valued for the way in which it unifies the material - for its suggestiveness and its fertility.

1. Cf. p. 35 above.

2. LSD, p. 54.

3. LSD, p. 38.

4. Popper reaffirms this view of the "critical method in his Addendum to the OS, sec. 10 (OS II, 380-1)

The details of Popper's arguments in support of historical interpretations and methodological proposals as conventions differ, as do the materials on which they are, respectively, operators. There is, however, a considerable similarity: both methodological recommendations and historical interpretations represent points of view, because both are proposals; they are not intrinsic to the material on which they operate. And both are to be appraised partly in terms of their fertility.

Moreover, the contrast between scientific theories and historical interpretations is not as sharp as Popper contends in the last chapter of The Open Society. As I shall argue below<sup>1</sup>, historical interpretations are open to criticism when they are not testable, and Popper has written subsequently that "intersubjective criticism" is "the more general idea" of which "intersubjective testing is merely a very important aspect."<sup>2</sup> It is then possible to make a better case than Popper does in The Open Society for historical methods as being scientific, because historical work can meet the fundamental standard of openness to criticism.

There is, then, a discrepancy between Popper's potential and actual image of history, which needs to be explained. It may be argued that Popper sees history in a rather harsh light because there are factors external to philosophical argument that influence his views; historical methodology is intertwined with social and political questions. Some of these external factors can be traced in the evolution of his views on probability, an evolution which is discussed below.<sup>3</sup>

1. In chapter four.

2. LSD, p. 44, added note

3. See section five of this chapter below.



#### IV. Scientific Theories and Falsifiability, with an Addendum on Causal Explanation

There is a sense in which Popper develops his ideas on scientific theories dialectically.<sup>1</sup> The thesis is the naive empiricist view that theories can be read off inductively from recurrent events in nature. The antithesis is the Conventionalist conception of the scientist as the autonomous creator of scientific theories, rather than the faithful amanuensis of nature, transcribing by induction.

There is also something like an internal dialectic, or paradox, in Popper's exposition of these two views: in Inductivism, nature's scribe produces results that are justified by subjective means; in Conventionalism, the inventive theorist seeks a patent of final certainty for his creations. Each of these doctrines produces, as it were, its contradictory. The difficulties cannot be resolved within the respective terms of the doctrines. Popper's proposals offer a way out of the untenable positions reached from Inductivist and Conventionalist premises.

Popper's dialectical criticism of Inductivism and Conventionalism provides a backdrop for what is to the fore in The Logic of Scientific Discovery: his exposition of what he considers to be the distinctive characteristic of the theories of empirical science - that they are open to falsification, at least in principle.

The difficulties with the Inductivist conception of verification have been discussed above: it is impossible to establish what statements were to be considered meaningful, because verifiable. Scientific theories, and indeed, all descriptions, transcend experience,<sup>2</sup> for they contain universals, which

"cannot be correlated with any specific sense-experience.  
....Universals cannot be reduced to classes of experiences;  
they cannot be 'constituted'" *β*.

1. Cf. Popper's comparison of the "method of trial and error" with the dialectical approach (*What is Dialectic?*, CR, 312-315); see Chapter Six below for another discussion of Popper's critical approach as dialectical.

2. LSD, p. 94.

3. LSD, p. 95.

Verifiability discards the baby of scientific theories along with the bath-water of metaphysics.

Scientific theories cannot be based on perceptual experience; the view that

"science is an attempt to classify and describe perceptual knowledge" 1. is subjective and unsatisfactory. Natural laws cannot be derived by induction, which permits only subjective assertions of belief that an observed regularity will recur.

Popper proposes as part of the definition of natural laws that they are "invariant with respect to space and time." 2. Scientific theories, then, involve statements of universal scope. No conglomeration of experiences, nor collection of particular statements, can give sufficient support to such universal statements; the gap cannot be breached.

To speak of "protocol sentences", sentences which represent or record experiences, as do Neurath and Carnap, does not overcome the difficulty; the idea

"is merely a relic - a surviving memorial of the traditional view that empirical science starts from perception." 3.

Scientific theories are statements of universal scope, which cannot be verified by immediate experiences, or particular statements. It is, however, a matter of logic, that a universal synthetic statement can be contradicted by a singular existential statement. This is the "asymmetry"<sup>4</sup> which makes falsifiability a workable criterion of demarcation for empirical science.

The Conventionalist objection to falsifiability - that it is ambiguous - has been discussed above.<sup>5</sup> Popper's answer, in brief, is that the Conventionalist objection is a Pyrrhonist attempt to throw sand in the eyes of the

1. LSD, p. 94.

2. LSD, p. 253.

3. LSD, p. 97.

4. LSD, p. 41:

"My proposal is based upon an asymmetry between verifiability and falsifiability; an asymmetry which results from the logical form of universal statements. For these are never derivable from singular statements, but can be contradicted by singular statements."

5. Cf. p. 37 above.

sober scientist - for Popper, a scientist tests soberly and severely, although he may conjecture wildly, and, in a figurative sense, drunkenly.

Given his criticism of traditional empiricism, summarized in the preceding pages, it is evident that Popper must show that his conception of the "basic statements", which can provide clear-cut falsifications of scientific theories, is not, to use his pejorative term, psychologistic. The formal requirement for basic statements is that they be singular existential statements,<sup>1</sup> and the material requirement is that they assert

"that an observable event is occurring in a certain individual region of space and time." 2.

The crucial point here is Popper's requirement that basic statements make assertions about 'observable events':

"basic statements must be testable, inter-subjectively, by 'observation'" 3.

To speak of observations and perceptions in protocol sentences is "psychological"<sup>4</sup>; to speak of observable events need not be. In the sense in which Popper uses it, an 'observable event'

"might just as well be replaced by 'an event involving position and movement of macroscopic physical bodies'"

"tests involving the perception of one of our senses can, in principle, be replaced by tests involving other senses" 5.

Observability, as Popper uses it, is a "primitive concept", "neutral" with respect to psychologism, mechanism or materialism; it is linked to testability, which is not dependent on the perceptions of the particular scientist performing the tests.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the basic statements used in falsification are free from the defect of subjectiveness, or psychologism, which Popper found in the traditional empiricist preference for basing science on personal observations or perceptions.

Basic statements are not, as the Inductivist believes, justified by immediate experiences. Popper argues that they "are accepted...by a free decision" "reached in accordance with a procedure governed by rules"<sup>7</sup>.

1. LSD, p. 102.      2. LSD, p. 103.      3. LSD, p. 102.      4. LSD, p. 103.  
5. LSD, p. 103.      6. LSD, p. 103.      7. LSD, p. 109, 106.



One such rule,

"of special importance...tells us that we should not accept stray basic statements - i.e., logically disconnected ones - but that we should accept basic statements in the course of testing theories." 1.

That is, agreement on basic statements, or acceptance of experimental results, is "a purposeful action," "part of the application of a theoretical system".<sup>2</sup>.

Decisions are reached, by agreement on basic statements, in the course of testing theories, but it is not the case that the universal statements of scientific theories themselves are accepted by decisions. Popper objects to the Conventionalist claim that scientific theories are chosen for "aesthetic motives": the simplicity of the theories. Popper's riposte is that scientific theories are selected, not by decisions, as the Conventionalist argues, but by survival in competition:

"We choose the theory which best holds its own in competition with other theories; the one which, by natural selection, proves itself the fittest to survive. This will be the one which not only has hitherto stood up to the severest tests, but the one which is also testable in the most rigorous way. A theory is a tool which we test by applying it, and which we judge as to its fitness by the results of its applications." 3.

A good scientific theory, fit to survive, is according to Popper one which can be severely tested; it permits attempts to falsify it from many sides, so to speak. A scientific theory prohibits those basic statements which would falsify it; the more a theory prohibits, the more it is open to falsification. There are more "opportunities" for a theory to be refuted, the more it prohibits; for then it excludes a larger class of basic statements, or potential falsifiers.

1. LSD, p. 106.

2. LSD, p. 106, 111.

3. LSD, p. 108. Popper's Darwinian view of the grounds for accepting one theory in preference to another may be considered to be part of his positivist inheritance; in Ernst Mach's

"positivistic theory of knowledge...human knowledge is a biological phenomenon, part of the history of man. Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, [Mach] conceived knowledge as a never ending process of adjustment of thoughts to reality and to each other."

Joergen Joergensen, The Development of Logical Empiricism

(International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago, 1951) II no. 9 p. 7)

But Popper argues, in his conclusions to LSD, that the biological view of science is not exhaustive. See p. 36<sup>1</sup> below.

And it is with this class of potential falsifiers that Popper links the notion of the empirical content of a theory; for "the theory does not assert anything about" "the class of permitted statements" - rather, the class of basic statements, which the theory rules out, constitutes its empirical content, for it is about these statements that the theory makes assertions.<sup>1</sup>

The objective methods of empirical science proceed not so much in a vicious circle<sup>2</sup> as in a spiral. There is, Popper argues, no "'absolute'", "rock-bottom" "empirical basis of objective science":

"The bold structure of [scientific] theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or 'given' base; and when we cease our attempts to drive our piles into a deeper layer, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being." 3.

#### Addendum: Causal Explanation.

The best-known and most explicit instance of the way in which Popper's ideas on history derive from his philosophy of science, as first worked out in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, is Popper's original analysis of historical explanation in The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism. In these latter works Popper argues that historical explanation follows, with some small peculiarities, the procedures of causal explanation common to all the empirical sciences. This contention, as well as the associated questions of how historians should or do explain, have come under much discussion in the years since Popper first published The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism; and Popper's original position has been one point of departure, both for its advocates and its opponents.

1. LSD, pp. 112-113

2. As Popper says the proposals of Conventionalism do:

"A certain school of philosophers of scientific method have concluded...that science always argues in a circle....." OS, II, 259

3. LSD, III.

Popper, in introducing his model of historical explanation, in The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, refers to a passage on causal explanation in The Logic of Scientific Discovery:

"To give a causal explanation of an event means to deduce a statement which describes it, using as premises of the deduction one or more universal laws, together with certain singular statements, the initial conditions. For example, we can say that we have given a causal explanation of the breaking of a certain piece of thread if we have found that the thread has a tensile strength of 1 lb. and that a weight of 2 lbs. was put on it. If we analyse this causal explanation we shall find several constituent parts. On the one hand there is the hypothesis: 'Whenever a thread is loaded with a weight exceeding that which characterizes the tensile strength of the thread, then it will break'; a statement which has the character of a universal law of nature. On the other hand we have singular statements (in this case two) which apply only to the specific event in question: 'The weight characteristic for this thread is 1 lb.', and 'The weight put on this thread was 2 lbs.'

"We have thus two different kinds of statement, both of which are necessary ingredients of a complete causal explanation. They are (1) universal statements, i.e., hypotheses of the character of natural laws, and (2) singular statements, which apply to the specific event in question and which I shall call 'initial conditions'. It is from universal statements in conjunction with initial conditions that we deduce the singular statement, 'This thread will break'. We call this statement a specific or singular prediction.

"The initial conditions describe what is usually called the 'cause' of the event in question...." 1.

An account of how Popper characterizes the constituents of causal explanation, universal laws, and singular or basic statements, has been given in the preceding discussion of scientific theories and falsifiability. The other major point about causal explanation, according to Popper, is that it has the same structure as a prediction, which is that of a deduction: deduction, in a causal explanation or a prediction, depends on the logical relations between ideas; it is, then, within the province of the logic of knowledge. The consequences of this structural similarity between explanation and prediction are of some importance in the working out

1. LSD, pp. 59-60. Popper cites this passage in a slightly different translation, in OS (chap 25, sec. 11: II, 262) and paraphrases it quite closely in PH (122-123).



of Popper's ideas on history and will be discussed below in connection with his model of historical explanation and his remarks on the impossibility of predicting the future.<sup>1.</sup>

In the discussion of historical explanation subsequent to Popper's publication of The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, one possible alteration, suggested by C.G. Hempel, was that statistical laws might replace universal statements, in some explanations. As will appear from the following discussion of Popper's views on probability, he would be likely to object to such a proposal.

Probability statements, according to Popper, are not falsifiable<sup>2.</sup> for they cannot be refuted by a single instance. The universal statements used in causal explanation must be falsifiable, it would appear, if the explanation is to hold water; for if ~~a single instance might refute the~~ *a law does not apply to all instances of a* ~~premise of an explanation, how are we to be sure that it is not just that~~ *one of those* ~~instances that we are trying to explain, with the aid of the law, to which the law does not apply.~~ *specified and without exception*

1. In Chapter Two, Sec. II, pt. 3. "The Symmetry Thesis".

2. Though Popper argues that physicist can use probability statements as falsifiable statements, when dealing with a number of events, for they can decide on standards for a typical segment of a probability sequence, and then determine whether the set of events meets this standard (LSD, p.204) But clearly, this license cannot be extended to an historian explaining a single event.

## V. Probability

Popper's ideas on probability, as originally discussed and later annotated in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, give some interesting indications of the evolution of his views, which are relevant to a consideration of his ideas on history. In The Logic of Scientific Discovery Popper has a lengthy and involved discussion of probability, of which I shall not consider the finer points. The gist of it is that Popper is defending a frequency interpretation of probability, against various interpretations of probability, such as that of Keynes, to which Popper objects, as either subjective, or requiring a metaphysical theory of indeterminacy in the nature of things:

"a metaphysical idea that events are, or are not, determined in themselves" 1.

The frequency interpretation, which Popper advocates, has the advantage of objectivity: it views probabilities as describing the frequencies with which an event occurs, within a sequence.

Popper's argument here is in some respects analogous to his rejection of perceptual experience as a basis for empirical science, because it is subjective; and to his attempt to characterize the procedures of empirical science in a way that shows how they are objective.

Popper remarks that he has changed his views on probability more than on any other topic in The Logic of Scientific Discovery: from the frequency interpretation which he advocates there, to what he now calls a propensity interpretation, which is, as he says in a footnote added in the 1959 edition:

"a new objective interpretation, very closely related to the frequency interpretation, but differing from it even in its mathematical formalism." 2.

An associated change in Popper's ideas is in his attitude to metaphysical idea, mentioned above, of a built-in determinacy or indeterminacy in

1. LSD, p. 206; cf. p. 212, for the same thought.

2. LSD, p. 149.

nature. The metaphysical view that Popper dismissed, when writing The Logic of Scientific Discovery in the early 1930's, he is

"now anxious to recommend, because it seems to me to open new vistas, to suggest the resolution of serious difficulties, and to be, perhaps, true." 1.

"I do not now object to the view that an event may hang in the balance, and I even believe that probability theory can best be interpreted as a theory of the propensities of events to turn out one way or another. ...But I should still object to the view that probability theory must be so interpreted. That is to say, I regard the propensity interpretation as a conjecture about the structure of the world." 2.

While Popper does not employ his metaphysical convictions to support his methodological or political proposals<sup>3</sup>, in reasoned argument, it appears that he considers these convictions to be in some sense prerequisite for practical action.<sup>4</sup> It may be that this change in Popper's attitude to the metaphysical doctrine of indeterminacy is linked with his advocacy of libertarianism; that positing an indeterminacy in the nature of things supports metaphysical arguments for free will; and it may be that Popper's interest in voluntarism and associated ideas was increased by his fiery arguments in The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism against certain theories of historical determinism, and by the events which stimulated Popper to write these works.

That is, it might be conjectured that there is a certain amount of reciprocal influence of Popper's ideas on history on his philosophy of science and that this is one important factor to be considered in examining the evolution of his philosophical views: that there is a congruence between these two aspects of his thought which is not wholly due to his ideas on ~~on~~ history being derivative from and dependent on his philosophy of science.

1. LSD, 1959 footnote, p. 206.

2. LSD, 1959 footnote, p. 212.

3. Cf. Popper's arguments against sociologism (OS, II, 209; chap 23: "All these considerations are entirely independent of the metaphysical 'problem of free will'")

4. cf. p. 35 above.



VI. The Logic of Scientific Discovery  
and  
The Logic of Historical Inquiry

Popper, in working out his methodological proposals for empirical science, comes to the conclusion that

"The demand for scientific objectivity makes it inevitable that every scientific statement must remain tentative for ever." 1.

This view is comparable to that which many historians take of their craft: the results of critical examination of evidence, reached by rigorous attention to certain canons, can never escape the possibility, and perhaps the necessity, for future revision.

The requirements of science, according to Popper, bear some resemblance to the conditions of historiography. A science, writes Popper,

"needs points of view, and theoretical problems" 2.

The experimental work of a scientist is a "purposeful activity", guided by these points of view and theoretical problems.

A scientist is not, as in the stereotype of traditional empiricism, merely the amanuensis of nature, recording instances of experience which convey inherent chunks of theory. Rather, the scientist is "active"<sup>3</sup>; experience is not given, but made, and it is in this sense that experience is a "method"<sup>4</sup>, the method of the empirical sciences.

Popper's image of science is strikingly similar to a widely accepted view of the historian's craft, which has been formulated in the course of revising a previous conception analogous to traditional empiricism's view of science. The historian is not a passive scribe of the immutable past, which awaited his coming in documents and other evidence; the past is not given, but must be grasped in terms of points of view, as Popper himself emphasizes, and problems,<sup>5</sup> as Lord Acton proclaimed a good while back. The historian

1. LSD, p. 280

2. LSD, p. 106

3. LSD, p. 280

4. LSD, title of section 5, p. 39

5. As Popper now argues, cf. below Chapter Three, section V.

does not transcribe, but actively constructs, and, as it were, invents the past. Facts are not ready-made; as Carl Becker once wrote, sceptically and provocatively, a historical fact is what you think it is: evidence is perhaps as much a matter of method in history, as experience is, in Popper's view of science.

Comparing Popper's view of science with this current view of history - in both, conclusions are eternally tentative - a reversal of classical positivism is apparent. Traditionally, positivism attempted to emulate empirical science in other fields, in order to attain a like certainty of results; it might be contended that the positivist wanted to copy the objective procedures of science, merely as a means to such certainty: that the value of objectivity, for the positivist, was instrumental.

In Popper's view, it is one of the conditions of scientific objectivity that its results be tentative, for objective methods cannot impart certainty to their results. In comparing Popper's view of the results of science, theories, with the historian's view of his conclusions, interpretations of past events, this question of objectivity may seem to throw a spanner into the works. It qualifies, while not refuting, the contention that, on the basis of Popper's philosophy of science, as in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, it is possible to construct a more positive account of history than Popper does, in his later works. The problem of objectivity is not, I think, sufficient in itself to account for the unflattering picture which Popper draws of history: many historians consider that their work possesses a sturdy scaffolding in objective procedures, which are "inter-subjectively testable".<sup>1</sup> But these objective items of method are not, as was noted previously, strictly analogous to the scientific methods that Popper describes. Whereas scientific theories are in principle testable, historical interpretations are, as I shall argue below, not circular as Popper alleges because they are open to criticism, and Popper has recently described "intersubjective testing" as a special case of "the more general idea" of "intersubjective criticism".<sup>2</sup> However, historical criticism and intersubjectively acceptable

1. pp. ~~28~~ 29-31 above

2. LSD, p. 94.





historical work in general involves empathic understanding, as has been suggested above and will be argued below,<sup>1</sup> and there is no room in Popper's methodological views for empathic understanding as a scientific activity.

The comparison of Popper's image of science with history can be extended, then, but will not reach to include a rigorous interpretation of the unity of scientific method.

But science, in Popper's eyes, is something more than the well-constructed scaffolding, on which the preceding comparison was based; it is more than a matter of the survival of fit theories. The Darwinian view discussed above<sup>2</sup> is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. In his conclusions to The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Popper puts forward what might be described as a Faustian view of science, with its eternally tentative results, as a quest without grail:

"The wrong view of science betrays itself in the craving to be right, for it is not his possession of knowledge, of irrefutable truth, that makes the man of science, but his persistent and recklessly critical quest for truth.

"Has our attitude, then, to be one of resignation? Have we to say that science can fulfil only its biological task; that it can, at best, merely prove its mettle in practical applications which may corroborate it? Are its intellectual problems insoluble? I do not think so. Science never pursues the illusory aim of making its answers final, or even probable. Its advance is, rather, towards the infinite yet attainable aim of ever discovering new, deeper, and more general problems, and of subjecting its ever tentative answers to ever renewed and ever more rigorous tests." 3.

The first part of this passage, and Popper's fallibilist view in general, has been described<sup>4</sup> as a gloss on Goethe:

"es irrt der Mensch so lang' er strebt" 5.

- 25-26,30 143-44 145-9  
1. Cf. pp. 9-10 above and Chapter Three below, pp. 4-5 7  
2. p. 37 above 3. LSD, p. 281 4. p. 38 footnote 3.  
5. Meinecke claims to derive his Historismus, with its leading conceptions of individuality and process, from Goethe, who appears to be a matrix for almost every idea.



The latter part, where Popper sets limits on a Darwinian view of science, inherited from Ernst Mach, might be compared with Nietzsche, who was also concerned with the repercussions of Darwinism on human activity and achievement; and this comparison suggests the basis of the analogy of Popper's view of science with existentialism.

Chapter Two  
Popper on the Hypothetico-Deductive  
Model of Historical Explanation

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# I. Popper's Analysis of the Logic of Historical Explanation as Part of his Critique of Historicism

Popper has subsequently said of the ensuing discussion of the theory of historical explanation with which his and Hempel's names are associated that, in effect, a mountain has been made out of a molehill:

"Really, I found the discussions which centred round my remarks on the question of the background of [historical explanations] in universal laws so bad that I didn't even answer my critics." 1.

Popper makes this statement in an interview which has been published with the proviso that it is to be considered "a conversational treatment" and not "a formal statement" of Popper's views;<sup>2</sup> it is, nonetheless, Popper's "first public answer" to the "critics" of his views on historical explanation, in which he argues that his "theory of historical explanation" is concerned with situational analysis or situational logic, which he had "described...briefly both in The Poverty of Historicism and in The Open Society," and which he now says is

"far removed from what people have been discussing - namely, the completely uninteresting, though logically valid, claims about universal laws." 3.

The discussion "centred on" his "remarks" about the hypothetico-deductive structure of historical explanation has, in Popper's opinion, misrepresented his analysis of historical explanation. The logical "background"<sup>4</sup> of historical explanations is the same as that of all explanations:

"laws are implicitly assumed and taken for granted in every explanation" 5.

However the laws which are presupposed

"are not what interests us in a historical explanation, and they are certainly not characteristic of historical explanations." 6.

1. K.R. Popper, "Historical Explanation: an Interview" (Replies to questions by Michael Tanner, John Dunn and Alistair Young), Cambridge Opinion v. 28(1959) pp. 20-25; hereafter cited as HE.

2. HE, p. 21    3. HE, p. 22    4. HE, p. 22    5. HE, p. 21    6. HE, p. 21 .



Popper had, in his original remarks about historical explanation, distinguished between logical and semi-pragmatic considerations. Such universal laws as historical explanations presuppose are not in the historian's "line of interest" which is with particular events, not generalizations. Moreover, such laws as historical explanations require are, for the most part, "trivial"<sup>1</sup>. What is "characteristic", indeed, the "main feature of historical explanation", Popper now says, is situational logic or situational analysis. What situational logic involves will be discussed in ~~the second half of this~~ chapter, 3.

Although this interview with Popper might seem to license a restriction of the following consideration of Popper's views on historical explanation to situational logic, to do so would, I think, misrepresent these views. Popper's dismissal of the discussion of the covering-law theory deserves some attention. Although he now describes the logical background of historical explanations in the universal laws as "completely uninteresting"<sup>2</sup>. at the time when he wrote The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, he found these points of sufficient importance to develop them at some length. We can, I think, gloss Popper's dismissal of the discussion of the logic of historical explanation: where this discussion fell down was in neglecting the purposes for which Popper made his points about the logical background of historical explanations in universal laws.

As I shall often have occasion to stress in the following pages, Popper's arguments rarely deal with topics in isolation; they are, rather, functional. In the present instance, Popper's views on the logic of historical explanation are meant to steer clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of what he calls historicism; they are meant to displace fallacious doctrines about the practice of history that he attributes to anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism respectively.

1. OS, II, 263-5; PH, p. 145

2. HE, p. 22. This passage has already been cited at greater length, p.54 above.

The purpose of Popper's analysis is, first, to establish that there is no distinctive logic of historical explanation, as has been claimed by theories of historical methods which Popper thinks are associated with anti-naturalistic historicism;<sup>1</sup> on the contrary the logical structure of historical explanation does not according to Popper differ from that of scientific explanation. Secondly Popper's aim is to bring out the limitations on the use of theories in historical work, in order to show that there can be no objective patterns in history. Popper argues that the theories presupposed in explaining particular events provide only a local structure so to speak, and that the selection and overall organization of historical evidence cannot be guided by testable and therefore objective theories.<sup>2</sup> Hence it is not possible to establish an overarching theoretical organization of historical facts which can license assertions about the meaning of particular historical events in the way that a testable scientific theory licenses assertions about the significance of those natural events which come within its scope. If Popper has correctly indicated the limitations on the use of theories in the "practice of history", then it is not possible to make objective assertions about the meaning of the past or about that of particular time-spans in the past, and predictions of the future course of history cannot be based on extrapolating patterns of past events.

Popper's explication of his analysis of the logical background of historical explanations proceeds by showing the limitations of the considerations by which a case was made for a distinctive logic of historical explanation. This case can be summarized in terms of three contentions.<sup>3</sup> It will be seen that Popper does not reject the items in this case as completely unfounded. Rather, he argues that when rightly stated, their

1. See chapter four on historicism for the connection of what is known in German as Historismus with what Popper calls anti-naturalistic historicism.

2. See chapter five, "Popper on History".

3. Here I follow Rudolph H. Weingartner's exposition in "Historical Explanation", Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (N.Y.1967) IV pp. 7-8, but I order the three contentions he presents differently.



force is not what the advocates of a distinctive logic of historical explanations require; these contentions indicate some of the peculiarities of historical explanation, but they do not establish that such explanations possess a distinctive logic.

There is, first, a *prima facie* argument against the possibility of there being causal laws valid for all of human history. The immense variations in the conditions and modes of human life exhibited throughout human history, preclude or would seem to, there being any constant conjunctions of importance, on which universally valid causal laws might be based. Human nature is not fixed but is heterogeneous throughout human history; consequently there can be no uniformities holding for all history, as scientific laws hold for all nature.

The argument that the logic of historical explanation must differ from that of scientific explanation, is one that Popper attributes to historicism in the more general form that the methods for the study of social life cannot be those of the natural science, because, it is alleged, there neither are nor can be laws of any significance valid throughout human history.<sup>1</sup> It will be seen that Popper does not attempt to show that there are any significant uniformities valid for all history, but he denies that the lack of such laws affects the logic of historical explanation.

The distinctiveness of the historian's subject matter, by contrast with that of the natural scientist, may be even more strikingly formulated. The previous argument against there being universally valid causal laws applicable to human history is compatible with the possibility of there being uniformities of limited but not universal validity applying to human history. But this might be denied: in support of the case for a distinctive logic of historical explanation it was also maintained that generalization at any level was irrelevant to the historian's pursuit because he sought to apprehend unique particulars or historical individuals, which generalizing methods could only deform. For this pursuit scientific methods are *hors de jeu* and

1. PH, p. 5-7.



intuitive methods of apprehension de rigueur. Historical phenomena were alleged to be distinctive on account of their uniqueness and consequently required distinctive procedures on the part of the historian to apprehend and explain.

It is perhaps difficult to appreciate the force which this argument was once thought to have because the standard criticism of it has become quite familiar in connection with the development and defence of the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation. Popper argues that the historian's interest in particular events does not mean that he can apprehend such events in their actual uniqueness; and moreover, that this characteristic interest on the part of the historian does not affect the logical foundations of historical explanation.<sup>1</sup>

A further argument for a distinctive logic of historical explanation may, but need not be, linked with the preceding two.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether it is denied that there are any significant uniformities persisting throughout history, or even any limited uniformities at all, it is argued that if there were causal laws applying to history they could not provide what is requisite for historical explanations: what makes the historical activities of human beings a subject for explanation is not a matter of causal laws but of the aims, motives and intentions of the historical agents. Consequently, it is argued, historical explanation presupposes that the historian has grasped the aims, motives or intentions of the agents, and that this apprehension requires a means akin to re-enacting their actions, the method of empathic understanding.

Empathic understanding represents a different emphasis on Verstehen than the intuitive understanding mentioned in connection with the claim that the historian can apprehend historical events in their uniqueness. Both these claims were made in connection with doctrines of Verstehen. They are best considered separately as they rest on different foundations and are not of the same seriousness. Popper, as we shall see, disposes

1. See below, p. 261-3

2. Weingartner, op. cit. pp. 7-8.

quite simply of the claim that the historian can apprehend historical events as unique by intuition; it is shown to rest on a logical impossibility.<sup>1</sup> The claim that the explanation of human action presupposes empathic understanding is more substantial, and Popper's theory of situational logic is meant to establish that empathic understanding is not required to explain past human actions: that aims and intentions can be explained in terms of their appropriateness to the agent's situation.

The case for empathic understanding might be put in an extreme or in a moderate form. It might be argued that causal explanation is completely irrelevant to historical explanation, or that the former may be involved in, but does not suffice for, historical explanation. Thus it might be argued that historical explanation has an utterly distinctive logic, or that the logic of historical explanation includes indispensable elements which distinguish it from scientific explanation. In both variants, the complete or the partial distinctiveness of historical explanation is due to the historians' concern with explaining past human actions.

Neither form of this case, as was noted above, prejudges either whether there are uniformities in history, of universal or limited validity, or whether historical phenomena are unique and can be apprehended in their uniqueness, as was claimed by the second argument. The last argument is concerned with certain characteristic features of historical phenomena - that they involve human action - which are alleged to shape the logic of historical explanation. It is with these arguments in mind, alleged to support or to establish the case for a distinctive logic of historical explanation, that Popper defends his contention that an adequate historical explanation has the same logical background as causal explanation of a particular event in the natural sciences. Popper's approach to the problem of historical explanation is critical, in that he is concerned to show that these three contentions do not have the force that the advocates of a distinctive logic of historical explanation have claimed; they refer to peculiarities of

1. See below, p. 62

historical explanations which do not amount to logical differences. In effect, what Popper says is that if the idiosyncrasies of historical explanation, to which these arguments refer, are accurately described they do not detract from the case which Popper defends, for the unity of scientific method: that if a set of statements is considered to provide a historical explanation, then the logical background of these statements does not differ from that of a scientific explanation of a particular event.

Popper's analysis of historical explanation is meant to accommodate both the non-logical peculiarities of historical explanation and the logical structure which it shares with all scientific explanations. How successful Popper is in realizing this aim will be considered in the following pages.

I shall consider Popper's handling of the several arguments in support of a distinctive logic of historical explanation in a somewhat different order from that in which they were presented, which was meant to bring out the logical relations between these arguments; in particular, that the case for empathic understanding as requisite for historical explanation could be made independently of either or both of the other arguments. The most considerable arguments for a distinctive logic of historical explanation, which Popper takes most seriously, are based on the contention that historical explanation must deal with human action. He develops situational logic, particularly in his later and less accessible writings, with a view to showing that empathic understanding, or re-enactment, is not part of the method of historical explanation. Popper's attempt to show that the method of historical explanation can dispense with *Verstehen* in the sense of empathic understanding will be a persistent theme in this chapter.

The claim that historical phenomena are unique and the inference that the historian must employ distinctive methods of apprehension and explanation are easily countered. Popper argues that the uniqueness of historical phenomena in no wise distinguishes them from the phenomena which the natural scientist may study, describe or wish to explain. That natural phenomena exist uniquely in time and space has no more effect on the logic of scientific explanation than the similar existence of historical events has on the



logic of historical explanation. All particulars exist uniquely, but there is no field of knowledge which is privileged to apprehend the particulars of its subject matter as unique. The reasons for this limitation on what we can know are logical; the argument is central to Popper's considerations on the methods of history and the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to know everything about any unique particular, because the features of any particular which constitute its whole uniqueness can never be exhausted by observation or description.<sup>2</sup> Popper illustrates this contention with an infinite series of descriptions of a bird, which can never be completed.<sup>3</sup> All knowledge must be of abstract aspects of the unique particulars considered. We cannot describe any particular, whether it be a rock or a human being, in its whole uniqueness. Any particular can only be described in terms of characteristics which it shares with other particulars all of which exist uniquely, but of which we can only know abstract aspects.

Thus, insofar as the argument for Verstehen is that historical explanation involves intuitive understanding, in the sense of the historian apprehending historical particulars as unique "wholes", the argument is unfounded.<sup>4</sup> But Popper does not restrict himself to dismissing this claim for intuitive understanding; he also gives reasons why the mistaken notion that the historian apprehends historical particulars as unique wholes should have

1. See chapters four and five below

2. PH, 77-78 and OS, II, 245

3. In a footnote on PH, 77

4. Max Weber, in arguing for Verstehen as a distinctive and hazardous method of the social sciences, disavows this view. He remarks, with special reference to historical explanation: "When it is said that history seeks to understand the concrete reality of an 'event' in its individuality causally, what is obviously not meant by this...is that it is to...explain causally the concrete reality of an event in the totality of its individual qualities. To do the latter would be not only actually impossible, it would also be a task which is meaningless in principle."

(Max Weber, On the Methodology of the Social Sciences, trans. and ed. by E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch (The Free Press, New York, 1949) p.169."

Cited by C.G. Hempel, "Explanatory Incompleteness", in Reading in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, ed. May Brodbeck (New York, 1968), p.409

seemed plausible.<sup>1</sup> The plausibility of this claim does not come about because the historian has a privileged access to the way particulars exist uniquely. It is an effect of the historian's characteristic direction of interest in specific events. Nonetheless it is a misrepresentation of the logical "background" to this "line of interest"<sup>2</sup> to claim that the historian can know such specific events as unique wholes, for it has been seen that knowledge of particulars in their full uniqueness is impossible.

There is nevertheless, Popper allows, a sense in which a historian may "describe interesting happenings in their peculiarity or uniqueness" in that he may "include aspects" of such happenings which he "does not attempt to explain causally, such as the 'accidental' concurrence of causally unrelated events." 3.

But the sense in which historical events may be described as unique does not by stipulation, impinge upon the logic of historical explanation; rather, it may supplement causal explanation wherein singular events are "considered as typical".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the sense in which the historian can legitimately describe historical events as unique is quite different from the doctrine that Popper criticizes, that the historian can, by intuitive understanding, apprehend historical phenomena in their whole uniqueness: a doctrine that was alleged to support the claim that the historian employed distinctive methods of procedure.

Popper uses these results to restate the once popular distinction between the nomothetic or generalizing sciences and idiographic or

1. OS, II, 263-4; PH, 80; PH, 143-7

2. The term and the phrase in quotation marks come, respectively, from HE, p.21 and OS, II, 264.

3. PH, 146-7

4. PH, 147.

individualizing disciplines.<sup>1</sup> The nomothetic sciences are concerned chiefly with theories or generalizations; particular facts are considered only insofar as such facts have a bearing on the status of theories. The idiographic disciplines - history in short - are concerned with singular events. As has been seen, particular facts cannot be known in their whole uniqueness; they can be described as unique only in the sense discussed above. Theories and generalizations are used in history only as a means of describing and explaining particular facts, and Popper claims that the historian uses theories as means to these ends implicitly.

Popper views this demarcation of "specific" interests as imposing quite strict limits on the historian, as will be seen in considering Popper's theory of historical explanation as presented in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society.<sup>2</sup>

".....from our point of view, there can be no historical laws. Generalization belongs simply to a different line of interest, sharply to be distinguished from that interest in specific events and their causal explanation which is the business of history. Those who are interested in laws must turn to the generalizing sciences (for example, to sociology)." 3.

Popper, as we shall see, uses his reformulation of the idiographic view of history to argue that historical prophecy is impossible.<sup>4</sup>

Popper maintains that the contrasts between theoretical science and history do not reflect distinctive logical structures, but rather divergent directions of interest. In support of this contention, Popper presents

1. Popper works with a tripartite refinement of this distinction into theoretical, applied and historical sciences, which respectively propose and test theories, predict specific events, or describe and explain singular events. (OS, II, 263-4) See below, pp. ~~93-94~~ 92-94 for a further discussion of the specific interests of these kinds of sciences in connection with the several uses of the hypothetico-deductive method.

2. The limitations which the historian's characteristic direction of interest impose on him are markedly stricter than are any corresponding limitations for the theoretician, so that the historian's position does not quite parallel that of the theoretician. Cf. below p. ~~93-94~~ 93-94

3. OS, II, 264

4. Cf. below, p. ~~94~~ 94-95



the logical structure which he claims is used to implement an interest in the status of theories, as well as interests in predicting events, or in describing and explaining singular, specific events; a theoretical science such as physics, an applied science such as engineering, and history all rely on the hypothetico-deductive method, whose uses for these three directions of interest constitute, Popper says, the unity of scientific method.

The logical distinction to be drawn, Popper says, is not, as suggested between historical and scientific explanation as different in kind, but between the explanation of a regularity and that of a specific event. These two species of explanation are partly similar as well as partly dissimilar. In working out this distinction, Popper amends a confusion in Mill's account of explanation in a way that makes clear the logical requirements for adequate explanations, and also exhibits the confusion on which historicist claims to prophecy are based. Although the historian's characteristic concerns lead him to want to explain particular events, such explanations are not his exclusive prerogative, but rather one instance of the species of causal explanation, which may be used in natural sciences as well: as with "the evolutionary hypothesis"<sup>1</sup>.

## II. Explanation and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method of Science

### 1. The Two Kinds of Explanation and the Importance of their Differences

Popper argues that a necessary condition for the adequacy of historical explanation, as of causal explanation in science generally, is the proper deployment of laws of unrestricted validity. A causal explanation of a specific event means: "deducing a statement describing this event" from one or more universal laws in conjunction with "initial conditions" or "specific

1. PH, 106-108, 115-116, 126-7.

statements pertaining to the special case in question".<sup>1</sup> Where Mill's account of causal explanation was "not precise enough" was in failing to distinguish clearly between the universal laws and the initial conditions, both of which are required for a causal explanation.<sup>2</sup> The initial conditions, together with the relevant universal laws, constitute the explanans or explanatory apparatus from which the explanandum or statement describing the event in question is deduced in a satisfactory causal explanation.

Popper illustrates this analysis with a "causal analysis of the breaking of a certain thread":<sup>3</sup> the thread was overloaded with a weight of two pounds when it could only support a weight of one pound. The point of Popper's example is to illustrate the sharp distinction between the two kinds of constituents of the causal explanation of a specific event. The relevant universal laws assert that threads have tensile strengths corresponding to their structures such that, if a thread is loaded beyond its characteristic weight, it will break. The initial conditions specify the weight put on a thread of a certain structure. The specified structure of the thread is linked to its characteristic weight by applying the previously mentioned universal laws; and the load put on the thread, specified by the initial conditions, exceeded the characteristic weight thus determined: this is the causal explanation of its breaking.

It is customary to call the initial conditions the cause of the event in question, but Popper points out that this phrasing is elliptic; the initial conditions can be said to be the cause of the event only relative to the universal laws employed in the explanation. This usage has been fostered by a common feature of causal explanations. It is "very often" the case that the universal laws employed in causal explanation

"are...so trivial...that as a rule we take them for granted instead of making conscious use of them." 4.

1. PH, 122-3; OS, II, 262

2. PH, 122, 125

3. PH, 122-3, "a near-quotation", Popper says, from The Logic of Scientific Discovery, sec.12(pp.59-60). Popper uses the same example in his discussion of causal explanations, in OS, II, 262.

4. PH, 124.

It will be seen, subsequently, that Popper's theory of historical explanation, as he first stated it, turns on this common characteristic of causal explanations.

The explanation of a regularity does not quite parallel that of a specific event, and the differences between these two kinds of explanation demolish historicist hopes of prophesying the future from alleged historical laws which turn out to be trends, or singular historical statements.<sup>1</sup> Were the analogy between these two kinds of explanation complete, then the explanation of a regularity would be deduced from a combination of general laws with

"certain special conditions which correspond to the initial conditions but which are not singular, and refer to a certain kind of situation" 2.

But the analysis proposed by analogy does not work.

In explaining a 'singular specific event' the "specific statements pertaining to the special case in hand" are part of the premises of the explanation, or the explanans; in explaining a regularity, the conditions for its validity must be included in the formulation that is deduced from universal laws of greater generality - for if these conditions were omitted, the result would be a contradiction rather than an explanation. Consequently, the formulation of the regularity which is thus explained is explained unconditionally, which is not the case with causal explanations of "singular specific events" which are relative to the two kinds of constituents in the explanans.

This last point is crucial both in Popper's critique of the historicist's prophetic use of trends, as well as in his discussion of the historian's procedures of explanation. In the first instance, the dependence of trends upon initial conditions is neglected, invalidating the historicist claims to extrapolate trends as if they were explained regularities; and in the second, the general laws, with respect to which initial conditions are causes, are, can and, Popper insists, must be taken for granted by the historian.

1. PH, 124-130; PH, 115

2. PH, 125.



The force of Popper's analysis of the "two main cases"<sup>1</sup> of explanation, in the context of The Poverty of Historicism, is to make clear the confusion on which historicist hopes of prophecy are based. Trends - singular existential statements describing concrete sequences of events - cannot, however they are formulated, be deduced from combinations of universal laws alone because they also depend on initial conditions. Thus, explained trends do not hold unconditionally or universally as do explained regularities; and consequently trends cannot be extrapolated unconditionally into the future, in making a prophecy, for the continuation of a trend requires the persistence of the initial conditions on which it depends.

Some further remarks on the requirements for adequate explanations are in order. Popper mentions, in The Poverty of Historicism, two material conditions required for the scientific acceptability of an explanation, namely that:

"the universal laws be well tested and corroborated, and...we have also some independent evidence in favour of the cause, i.e., of the initial conditions." 2.

Whether historians can provide acceptable explanations given the first of these material conditions and given that Popper insists that the historian's interest is directed and perhaps restricted to particular events<sup>3</sup> will be discussed below.<sup>4</sup> The dilemma is this: Popper's restriction of the historian's "line of interest" to specific events would seem to imply that the historian cannot concern himself with the status of the laws which his explanations presuppose. If the relevant laws are trivial, as Popper claims, the historian's situation may not be problematic; but if the triviality of the laws is questioned, then the historian's explanations may be characteristically dubious.

The material conditions for scientifically acceptable explanations, in conjunction with the formal requirement of unrestricted validity for scientific laws, <sup>are</sup> Popper's safeguards against ad hoc, or circular, explanations:

1. PH, 122                      2. PH, 124
3. eg. PH, 143; OS, II, 264 and note 7 to chap. 25(OS,II,364)
4. Cf pp. ~~32~~ 92-93

"...it is an important postulate of scientific method that we should search for laws with an unlimited realm of validity. If we were to admit laws that are themselves subject to change, change could never be explained by laws. It would be the admission that change is simply miraculous, and it would be the end of scientific progress; for if unexpected observations were made, there would be no need to revise our theories; the ad hoc hypothesis that the laws have changed would 'explain' everything"

"These arguments hold for the social sciences no less than for the natural sciences." 1.

Popper's argument is directed against the conventionalist view according to which scientific laws are no more than mental constructions. Conventionalism would seem to license salvaging such constructions, in the face of "unexpected observations", by adding qualifications and restrictions. But it is difficult to see why Popper insists on the unrestricted validity of hypotheses as the only safeguard against this evasion of falsification. Restricted generalizations are no more vulnerable to this manoeuvre than are hypotheses of unrestricted validity, for if the conditions under which the former hold are made clear, then ad hoc additions to such generalizations in the face of falsifying evidence can be recognised as such. Popper's argument does not establish that, if we wish to preserve the honorific title of law for statements of unrestricted validity, restricted generalizations cannot be considered law-like; the preceding argument has shown that to say that generalizations are of limited validity is not the same thing as saying that such hypotheses are "subject to change" at will.

In a later publication, "The Aim of Science",<sup>2</sup> Popper discusses at some length the requirements for satisfactory explanations. First, the explicans must "logically entail the explicandum".<sup>3</sup> But this condition

1. PH, 103

2. "The Aim of Science", Ratio, I(1957), pp. 24-36; hereafter cited as "Aim".

3. "Aim", p. 24.

alone will not "exclude" circular or ad hoc explanations where "the only evidence for the explicans is the explicandum itself".<sup>1</sup> To prevent an explicans from being ad hoc in this sense it is necessary that it have "testable consequences which are different from the explanandum"; these Popper describes as "independent evidence in its favour".<sup>2</sup> But these conditions are still not sufficient to "characterize a satisfactory and independently testable explanation":

"Only if we require that explanations make use of universal statements or laws of nature (supplemented by initial conditions) can we make some progress towards realizing the idea of independent or non-ad hoc, explanations. For universal laws may be statements with a rich content, so that they may be independently tested everywhere, and at all times. Thus if they are used as explanations, they may not be ad hoc because they may allow us to interpret the explicandum as an instance of a reproducible effect. All this is only true, however, if we confine ourselves to universal laws which are testable, that is to say, falsifiable." 3.

To summarize Popper's requirements: for a given explanation to be in fact acceptable, the relevant laws must be "well-tested and corroborated" as well as of unrestricted validity; and there must also be "independent evidence" as well for the initial conditions, which are hypothetical statements without the generality of laws.

Popper's argument is that the laws used in acceptable scientific explanations must be of unrestricted validity so that, in any explanatory use of these laws, it will be possible in principle to find "independent evidence", in the sense in which Popper uses the term, in favour of these laws, and thus debar ad hoc explanations. What Popper states as a logical condition for the acceptability of scientific explanations - that the relevant

1. "Aim", p.25. That "the only evidence for the explicans is the explicandum itself" is a charge that Dray makes against Popper's strictly universal laws in historical explanations; they are "gross" generalizations with a single actual instance. (W. Dray "Professor Child on Neopositivism and History", Journal of Philosophy 59(4) (1962), p. 105; a criticism of A. Child's "Thoughts on the Historiology of Neopositivism", Journal of Philosophy 57 (1960) 665-74.

2. "Aim", p. 25, 24.

3. "Aim", p. 25-26.



laws be of unrestricted validity - depends actually on the practice of inter-subjective testing and criticism which constitutes scientific objectivity in Popper's view: for testing rather than logical form is required to safeguard against "gross" generalizations of a single instance masquerading as "universal statements or laws of nature".<sup>1</sup> But if inter-subjective testing and criticism of the relevant laws is the fundamental condition for acceptable explanations, then historical explanations relying on generalizations of restricted validity may also be acceptable explanations. To ensure that the relevant generalization is not ad hoc or a "gross" generalization of a single instance, it would be sufficient to require that it be testable in the neighborhood, so to speak, of the event to be explained: over a span of time and for approximately the social setting in which the event in question occurred.

The relation of Popper's contention that acceptable explanation requires laws of unrestricted validity to one argument in support of a distinctive logic of historical explanation - that there are no significant uniformities valid for all of human history - will be discussed below. Popper in effect admits the substance of this argument, that there are no regularities in human history which are both significant and universally valid, but he maintains that this circumstance does not impinge upon the logic of historical explanations. The laws which historical explanations presuppose are both universally valid, and trivial, in the sense of being uninteresting to both the theoretician and the historian. Of course, not all the laws used in historical explanation need be in any sense historical laws, so to speak: in the explanation Popper gives of the death of Giordano Bruno, the relevant universal law, "that all living things die when exposed to intense heat",<sup>2</sup> is drawn from common-sense scientific knowledge.

1. Cf. Dray's objection, mentioned above,

2. PH, p. 145.

## 2. Explanation: One of the Several Uses of the Hypothetico-Deductive Method

A consideration of the implications of the partial parallel between the "two main cases" of explanation does not exhaust the ramifications of the logical "background" of historical explanation. Both kinds of explanation, according to Popper, employ, often implicitly in the case of causal explanation, the hypothetico-deductive method; a statement is explained by being deduced from an explanans which includes<sup>1</sup> theories or hypotheses. Explanation, of regularities or of specific events, is but one of the several uses to which the hypothetico-deductive method can be put. The constituents and logical structure in predicting specific events and in testing scientific theories are the same as in causal explanation.<sup>2</sup>

In making predictions, the initial conditions and the universal laws are known and interest is directed towards what can be deduced from their combination as a prognosis; this use of scientific theories is characteristic of the applied sciences such as engineering. In testing theories, the initial conditions are known and certain specific events have occurred; the issue is whether these specific events are those forbidden by the theory which is being tested: that is, whether statements of these events contradict what can be deduced from the theory in conjunction with the known initial conditions; if this is the case, the occurrence of these events falsifies the theory in question. Such a problem is the characteristic concern of the theoretical sciences, natural and social, in which theories are proposed and tested for their scientific status.

Thus the several directions of scientific investigation all employ the hypothetico-deductive procedure. In the various uses described above, two of its three kinds of constituents - initial conditions, universal laws and

1. The point of this rather loose formulation is to indicate that the hypothetico-deductive method is common to both sorts of explanation.

2. OS, II, 263 and PH, 133, for what follows in the next two paragraphs.

specific events - are considered determinate, and the third constituent, which is considered problematic, is investigated by bringing the other two to bear on it through the hypothetico-deductive apparatus. The use made of the hypothetico-deductive procedure depends on the interest which its user has, arising from the problems at hand.

The logical structure of scientific procedure is the same in all its uses. It is the common logical structure in implementing the various purposes of scientific activity that Popper describes as the unity of scientific method. There is, he argues, no gap in this respect between the natural and the social sciences; the method of procedure in both is hypothetico-deductive: hypotheses are formulated, and tested through attempts to falsify them; those falsified are out of the running and the survivors are tentatively considered to be additions to scientific knowledge, and of course, always open to further testing<sup>1</sup>. The theories thus selected can be applied: predictions may be derived or specific events explained by the use of these theories in conjunction with the appropriate initial conditions.

The apparent idiosyncrasies attributed to the social sciences do not, Popper argues, impinge upon his analysis of the logical structure of procedure common to both natural and social sciences.

Some of the supposed peculiarities, such as the alleged reliance of the social sciences on a method of intuitive understanding, are heuristic and irrelevant to what constitutes scientific knowledge in the natural and the social sciences. Popper argues that the use of intuition is not exclusive to the disciplines that study man, for the physicist may also feel that he has an intuitive understanding of what atoms are like, but that such a feeling does not entitle him to claim that he knows what the structure of the atom is; the same argument applies to the intuitions of the social scientist.<sup>2</sup>

1. The method of the theoretical social sciences, as of the theoretical natural sciences, PH, 133-137; cf. above, chapter one section IV, for another discussion of Popper's views on hypotheses.

2. PH, 135, 137; note 44(2) to chapter II, OS, II, 192.



The only methodological difference<sup>1.</sup> which Popper admits between the natural and the social sciences is the rationality of the agents which affects the subject matter of the latter; and Popper argues that this feature of social life simplifies its study by comparison with the task of the natural scientist.

The different directions of interest in using the hypothetico-deductive procedure, in what is tested and in what is predicted, are characteristic of the theoretical and applied sciences respectively. The distinction which Popper draws here does not infringe upon the unity of scientific method, but amplifies it. Testing theories, in theoretical science, is a means toward an end: discovering theories of greater generality which explain accepted theories. Scientific activity is purposeful, according to Popper; and it is a theme of some of Popper's more recent publications, that the aim of science is to explain in the sense just explicated.<sup>2.</sup> Explanation thus can be considered to be the primary use of scientific theories, for the predictions sought in the applied sciences presuppose the results obtained in the theoretical sciences.

1. That Popper's views about the difficulties of prediction commit him to another distinctive methodological feature in the social sciences will be argued below, pp. ~~22-24~~ 76-81

2. Popper says that "the aim of science" is explanation in the sense of "discovery, of progressing to deeper layers of explanation" ("Aim", p.34); cf. also CR. p.61, p.63, p.222; cf. also some of the notes added to the 1959 English translation of Logik der Forschung:

"...the theorist is interested in explanation as such, that is to say, in testable explanatory theories: applications and predictions interest him only for theoretical reasons - because they may be used as tests of theories." added note, p.59, LSD.

"I consider the theorist's interest in explanation - that is, in discovering explanatory theories - as irreducible to the practical technological interest in the deduction of predictions. The theorist's interest in predictions, on the other hand, is explicable as due to his interest in the problem whether his theories are true; or in other words, as due to his interest in testing his theories - in trying to find out whether they cannot be shown to be false." added note p.61, LSD.

### 3. The Symmetry Thesis

Subsequent critical discussion of the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation has made much of the alleged "symmetry" between causal explanation and prediction.<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes argued that the hypothetico-deductive schema requires of a satisfactory scientific explanation that, had the relevant data been available beforehand, the explanatory apparatus could have been used to predict the event explained, prior to its occurrence. As Hempel has put it:

"an explanation of a particular event is not fully adequate unless its explanans, if taken account of in time, could have served as a basis for predicting the event in question." 2.

It is interesting to note that Popper does not state the symmetry thesis in this form. Popper's claim is that the hypothetico-deductive apparatus is multi-purpose: usable for the triad of problems which are of scientific interest. Explanation, prediction and testing each place different emphases on the logical structure of the hypothetico-deductive schema. Thus Popper maintains that explanation and prediction are structurally identical and qualifies this claim by reference to what might be described as semi-pragmatic considerations: to the differing emphases on this logical structure in its various uses, and to the relative importance of its uses in the scientific enterprise. The ubiquity of this logical structure in its different emphases is what Popper means by the unity of scientific method: that the several uses of the hypothetico-deductive apparatus cover the range of problems which concern the scientist.

For Popper either to accept or to reject the symmetry thesis raises difficulties for his theory of historical explanation, as I shall argue below.

1. The symmetry thesis has been criticized by Israel Scheffler, The Anatomy of Inquiry (New York, 1963), pp. 43-46, and also by Michael Scriven, "Explanations, Predictions and Laws" Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, III ed. Herbert Feigl and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis, 1962) pp. 176-190.

2. C.G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", Aspects of Scientific Explanation, p. 249

If Popper accepts the symmetry thesis as applying to his theory of historical explanation, then historical prediction would be possible; were Popper to deny that the symmetry thesis applies to historical explanation would be to admit at least one difference between the methods of the natural sciences and those of history and the social sciences.

If Popper were to maintain the symmetry thesis, his theory of historical explanation would lead to what he would consider to be historicist views. If the symmetry thesis were applicable to historical explanation it would mean that, in some cases, the explanans might have been isolated prior to the event and the event predicted; predictions of the future would be possible which were neither uselessly vague nor hopelessly trivial - Popper's objections to those historical predictions which he does not reject on logical grounds. Nor would the claim that historical explanations rely on laws that are trivial, in a sense still to be clarified, entail that the explanations themselves would be trivial nor, if the symmetry thesis is held to apply, need the corresponding predictions to be trivial. If Popper wished to maintain the symmetry thesis but to put historical explanation beyond its reach so as to avoid prediction of the future he would be forced to maintain that there is some sort of complexity in social life which makes it impossible to isolate the explanans prior to an event's occurrence so as to predict it. Since it is possible to predict natural events in this manner, this argument resembles the argument from social complexity, used by the historicist and explicitly rejected by Popper,<sup>1</sup> to support the claim that history and the social sciences require methods differing in kind from those of the natural sciences. Popper, as has been seen, thinks that, on the contrary, there is a simplifying factor, that "human beings...act...more or less rationally" which applies to the study of social life.

However, it will be seen that Popper also thinks that there is a peculiar kind of complexity in social life, due to the "uncertainty of the human factor", which puts severe limits on the use of social predictions to

1. PH, 139-141.



plan social life.<sup>1</sup> Reference to the "uncertainty of the human factor" would be a substantive reason for Popper to hold that the symmetry thesis does not apply to historical prediction.<sup>2</sup> But there seems to be no way to distinguish Popper's point of defence from his characterization of part of the historicist doctrine that the sociologist must deal with complexities which do not face the natural scientist:

"...a complexity due to the fact that social life...presupposes the mental life of individuals". 3.

For whatever else the "uncertainty of the human factor" involves, it certainly involves "the mental life of individuals."

Thus it might be that Popper would argue that the symmetry thesis is not relevant to his theory of historical explanation, because all historical explanation must be essentially incomplete in that the uncertain human factor

1. See chapter five below; it is also the reason for the unassailability of methodological individualism.

2. Cf. Popper's argument, PH, 158-9, against controlling "the human factor" by science

3. PH, p.12.

cannot be explained.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, then there is a distinctive methodological feature here which does not hold for the natural sciences: for the symmetry thesis must apply to the uses of explanation and prediction in the theoretical sciences if the soundness of theories is to be tested. It might be that Popper would argue that the "uncertainty of the human factor" has more impact on social prediction, with regard to social engineering, than it does on historical explanation: that the

1. I.C. Jarvie, The Revolution in Anthropology (London, 1964) p.151, says

"...explanations of human behaviour in terms of the logic of the situation, however, always fall short of a complete account because they cannot eliminate the human factor. They can only go so far, they cannot do more than leave the human element open; if we reconstruct the situational logic of an event we still do not account for it happening; in an emergency quick thinking might or might not save the day; whether it will or not is a prediction beyond our reach. Two people, identically situated, act differently because: one is a Christian, the other not; one thinks quickly, the other slowly; one always does the obvious, the other never does the obvious, and so on. Any theory which eliminated this human element would be explaining human thought and will, and any explanation of human thought would be an explanation of itself; i.e. it would explain too much."

Jarvie's final argument seems to me to be related to the contention that new discoveries cannot be predicted, but it does not, I think, prove as much as he thinks it does; one may explain past events which involve "human thought and will" without explaining human thought and will in general.

Jarvie's point that explanations in terms of situational logic "still do not account" for "an event happening" is interesting, in view of Hempel's critique of Dray's theory of rational explanation on the grounds that an adequate explanation must provide evidence for the occurrence of the event explained, which requires, Hempel argues, a covering law, because the "evaluative or appraising principle of action" which Dray describes

"affords grounds for believing that it would have been rational for A to do x (in a situation of kind C); but not for believing that A did in fact do x."

If situational logic is not to account for the occurrence of events, then this is to renounce one of the best arguments for the covering law theory of explanation.

(Carl G. Hempel, "Rational Action", Proceedings and addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 1961-2, v. 35, p. 12-13.

deficiencies of social prediction in this respect are more marked than those of historical explanation - and this is, of course, to deny that the symmetry thesis is applicable to historical and social explanation. In any case, given that Popper insists on the close relationship between theory and practice, the "uncertainty of the human factor" constitutes a methodological difference between the social and the natural sciences; more so than the "element of rationality" in "social situations" which Popper misleadingly describes as resulting in a distinctive methodological feature of the social sciences.<sup>1</sup>

But what is the force of this argument from the "uncertainty of the human factor" against the symmetry thesis applying to historical explanation? It is clearly not the case, as Popper extravagantly asserts at one point, that

"everything is possible in human affairs"<sup>2</sup>.

so that social prediction would seem to be out of the question. There are, as Popper says elsewhere, regularities in social life which impose limitations on what can be done.<sup>3</sup> There would then seem to be a prima facie possibility that the symmetry thesis might apply to historical explanations which refer to regularities such as these, which even the "uncertainty of the human factor" cannot overcome; and such predictions may well be important. Popper's reference to the "uncertainty of the human factor" is not enough to dispose of either the possibility of social prediction or of the symmetry thesis applying to historical explanation in some cases.

1. PH, 140-141; cf. below <sup>Chapter III, p. 111-113</sup> ~~pp. 111-113~~ for a discussion of this point.  
 2. OS, II, 197

"Indeed, it is necessary to recognise as one of the principles of any unprejudiced view of politics that everything is possible in human affairs..."

3. OS, I, 67, note 9 to chapter 5 OS, I, 236 and PH 61-63. Popper speaks of "social regularities which impose limitations upon what can be achieved by institutions". The "sociological laws" which refer to these regularities can be considered "natural laws of social life" and they are like the laws of nature in that

"every natural law can be expressed by asserting  
 that such and such a thing cannot happen." PH, p. 61.



Nonetheless, it seems that Popper must accept the lesser evil of an argument for the complexity of social life which is not distinguishable from some of what he says about historicist arguments of this genre, if he is to argue that the symmetry thesis is in general inapplicable to historical explanation, and thus to reject certain doctrines which he thinks constitute the central threat posed by historicism. By his insistence on "the uncertainty of the human factor", Popper denies the very possibility of historical determinism. "The uncertainty of the human factor" is, moreover, Popper's basis for arguing that certain theories of social policy which he associates with historicism, which he calls variously collectivist planning and Utopian engineering, are impossible.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding considerations have several consequences. If Popper is to maintain his critique of historicism, then he cannot accept that the symmetry thesis applies to his theory of historical explanation, and the difficulty here reflects on Popper's notion of historicism, rather than on the symmetry thesis: his rejection of social prediction is, as has been seen, too sweeping. Popper cannot adhere to the symmetry thesis if he is to defend the central points of his critique of historicism - demonstrating that his theory of historical explanation is shaped by his critique of historicism. That Popper would deny that the symmetry thesis applies to historical explanation, by an argument about the complexity of social life which is indistinguishable from a doctrine of anti-naturalistic historicism, in order to reject certain doctrines that he attributes to pro-naturalistic historicism, raises questions about the coherence of the collection of doctrines which he calls historicism. Because he must reject the symmetry thesis to maintain his critique of historical prophecy, he is forced to take a position which entails that there are significant methodological differences between the natural and the social sciences, even though he sometimes suggests that denial of the unity of scientific method is equivalent to historicism: the symmetry thesis must apply to the theoretical sciences if the procedure of testing theories is to be sound, and must not

1. Cf. below, chapter six for a discussion of these points.

apply to historical explanation because history and the social sciences investigate human actions which can never be completely explained or fully predicted.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Historical Explanation as Presupposing the Hypothetico-Deductive Model

Investigation of the ramifications of the logical structure of causal explanation has led far from the problem at hand which has to do with how well Popper's theory applies to actual historical explanation. It is not self-evident that historians, whose interest Popper says is focussed on "actual, singular or specific events"<sup>2</sup>.

do, in explaining such events, make use of the hypothetico-deductive method common to the several directions of scientific inquiry. All three uses of the hypothetico-deductive method refer to theories, for one thing, and there is little or no use of theory in evidence in much historiography. How, then, is Popper's account of the logic of explanation and its relation to the hypothetico-deductive method of science to be reconciled with the usual appearance of history? Popper argues that most historical explanations refer tacitly to the logical "background" of causal explanations in universal laws. His arguments that historical explanations make implicit use of the hypothetico-deductive method are convergent.

One suggestion which Popper put forward in connection with the example discussed above, of the causal explanation of the breaking of a thread, he amplifies into a full-scale characterization of historical explanation: namely, that the universal laws employed in causal explanation

"are very often so trivial (as in our example) that as a rule we take them for granted instead of making conscious use of them" 3.

1. If, Popper says, "human rationality" is "to survive" (PH, p.158) cf. chapter six.

2. PH, p.147

3. PH, p.124; Cf. above pp. 66-72; it is worth noting that Popper does not make this point in his discussion of causal explanation in The Logic of Scientific Discovery, sec. 12, pp.59-60.

What camouflages the historian's use of the hypothetico-deductive apparatus, in giving adequate explanations, is that such laws as historical explanations presuppose are trivial and uninteresting, both to the historian and to the theoretician. Consequently the historian can take these laws for granted in explaining specific events, and concentrate on the initial conditions which are logically causes only relative to some universal laws. Popper makes several claims about the historian's use of laws in historical explanation: that the historian does, can and must take laws for granted in explaining specific events, because the laws which his explanations presuppose are trivial: neither of theoretical interest nor of concern to the historian. The historian's direction of interest is supported by non-logical<sup>1</sup> features of the laws which his explanations presuppose.

One such "trivial general law" of which "most historical explanation makes tacit use" is

"that sane persons as a rule act more or less rationally."

Explanations which presuppose "this kind of first approximation," in conjunction with

"the initial conditions describing personal interests, aims and other situational factors such as the information available to the persons concerned"

make use of what Popper calls the "logic of the situation".<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. The Triviality of the Laws Presupposed in Historical Explanations

Popper relies on his characterization of the theories used in historical explanation as trivial in several connections. First, to counter one of the arguments brought in support of the claims for a distinctive logic of historical explanation. It was argued that the logic of historical explanation could not be like that of scientific explanation for material reasons: because the history of man reveals him to be a chameleon

1. Cf. below pp. 228 for an argument that the triviality of the relevant laws must be a non-logical characteristic.

2. OS, II, 265, cf. below chapter three.



through and through. Consequently there can be no significant causal connections valid throughout human history.<sup>1</sup> Popper, as has been seen, insists that the hypothetico-deductive method uses laws of unrestricted validity as the only safeguard against manoeuvres to evade falsification.<sup>2</sup> In countering this argument for a distinctive logic of historical explanation, Popper agrees that there may be no generalizations of any significance which are valid for all of human history but he maintains that this contention does not support the claim that historical explanation has a distinctive logic, for adequate historical explanations presuppose only trivial general laws. That historical explanation requires only trivial laws means that the appearance of historical explanations is deceiving: the relevant laws can be, and are, taken for granted in explaining particular events because of their triviality. Causal explanations of specific events which do not interest historians, as well as explanations of events which do, usually make tacit use of generalizations familiar to common sense. Consequently, no logical distinction can be drawn between historical and scientific explanation; and more generally the logical structure of historical explanation is the same as in all causal explanation, prediction and in testing theories.

Secondly Popper uses the triviality of the theories employed in historical work to argue against a contention that he attributes to pro-naturalistic historicism: namely that an objective patterning or theoretical organization of historical materials can be established which will license statements about the meaning of the past and perhaps that of the future. Popper argues in connection with his characterization of the historian's "line of interest" that the historian's only use of theories is to take them for granted in explaining specific events, where he directs his attention to the initial conditions. The sole use of theories in historical work is, Popper implies, as implicit premises in historical explanations, and because these theories are trivial

"they are...totally unable to bring order into the subject matter"<sup>3</sup>.

1. cf. above pp 58

2. cf. above, pp. ~~68~~<sup>68-71</sup>

3. OS, II, 264

These theories cannot fulfil the "selective and unifying" function that scientific theories do: theories can be used in the generalizing sciences to provide objective foci for the "point of view" or problem which, according to Popper's "searchlight theory"<sup>1</sup> of knowledge, is required to organize a wieldy selection for investigation from the inexhaustible materials available:

"...all scientific descriptions of facts...always depend on theories..."

"...the theories or universal laws of generalizing science introduce unity as well as a 'point of view'; they create, for every generalizing science, its problems, and its centres of interest as well as of research, of logical construction and of presentation."

"But in history...the host of trivial uninteresting laws we use are taken for granted; they are practically without interest, and totally unable to bring order into the subject matter."

"...those universal laws which historical explanation uses provide no selective and unifying principle, no 'point of view' for history." 2.

Consequently, those organizing conceptions which are necessary, according to Popper's "searchlight" theory of knowledge, to make sense of the chaos of historical material cannot be objectively delineated by means of theories.<sup>3</sup> If there are no testable theories available for organizing the multifarious facts of history, then this tells against historicist claims to discern the shape and meaning of history, for no objective patterning of history can be established. This argument, that there is no basis for historicist prophecy in any objective pattern of the past, is the converse side, so to speak, of Popper's qualified acceptance of one of the contentions alleged to support the case for a distinctive logic of historical explanation: Popper, as has been seen, agrees that there may be no significant uniformities valid throughout history, but denies that this circumstance affects the logic of historical explanation. And Popper uses just this contention, that there are no powerful theories which apply to all of history, to argue against the very enterprise of historical prophecy. Thus the triviality of the theories

1. OS, II, 260

2. OS, II, 260; OS, II, 264; OS, II, 265.

3. Cf. chapter five for a discussion of Popper's ideas on points of view in historical work.



used in historical work cuts both ways, against anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism: against there being a distinctive logic of historical explanation, and against there being any objective pattern of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, in arguing for situational logic and against psychologism - the attempt to explain social events solely in terms of social psychology<sup>2</sup> and also, in this context, an undue emphasis on psychological factors in explanation - Popper asserts that the

"'psychological' part of the explanation is very often trivial, as compared with the detailed determination of...action by what we may call the logic of the situation." 3.

Hence Popper recommends concentrating on explaining

"actions...in terms of the situation in which they occur"<sup>4</sup>.

on the grounds that the "psychological part" of the explanation can be minimized or even neglected on account of its triviality and, as will be discussed below, for other reasons as well.

But there is nothing to distinguish explanations presupposing trivial psychological generalizations<sup>5</sup> from any other historical explanation in which the relevant generalizations, of all kinds - sociological or common-sense science - are taken for granted on account of their triviality. More particularly, it was seen above that Popper also describes the general law presupposed in situational logic as trivial: "that sane persons as a rule act more or less rationally". It is not only the psychological generalizations presupposed in historical explanation which are trivial,

1. Neither this particular argument nor either of the other two arguments mentioned for a distinctive logic of historical explanation, commit their adherents to a belief in pro-naturalistic historicist prophecy. See chapter ~~three~~ <sup>four</sup> on historicism for a discussion of the logical relation between pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism.

2. OS, II, 88.

3. OS, II, 97.

4. OS, II, 97.

5. It can be argued that the "trivial" "'psychological' part" of the explanation Popper mentions (OS, II, 97) presupposes a psychological generalization to the effect that men act in accordance with an instinct of self-preservation, or so as to avoid pain.



according to Popper's theories, but all generalizations so used. Consequently, this particular argument of Popper's does not give grounds for minimizing or dispensing with the "'psychological' part" of explanations in favour of detailed consideration of the situation except in so far as historians generally take trivial laws for granted in explaining and concentrate on the initial conditions. Popper's recommendation that we turn our attention to the situation may not exclude psychological generalizations from having an explanatory function, if we follow his theory of historical explanation, for it may be the case that the initial conditions in the explanans - features of the situation - are causes only relative to some trivial psychological generalizations. If we accept<sup>1</sup> Popper's arguments about the triviality of the laws presupposed in historical explanation, the historian may neglect such psychological generalizations but they are logically necessary to the explanation. This use of triviality, then, does not take Popper very far in combatting psychologism as he defends situational logic. Popper does bring other arguments against psychologism, with reference to situational logic, which are discussed below;<sup>2</sup> perhaps the main point in Popper's discussion of situational logic in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" is an attempt to establish that situational logic can and must dispense with psychological terms in explanation. The force of this particular argument was discussed here to illustrate Popper's use of the term "trivial" in analysing historical explanation, which seems to me to be at times opportunistic.

What then of Popper's use of "trivial" to characterise the calibre of the laws presupposed in historical explanations? It has been seen that several of Popper's arguments depend on this point. After considering what is to be made of Popper's usage of the term "trivial", for which several interpretations have been proposed, I shall, in the course of this chapter, give two arguments for thinking that Popper makes a sophistical use of this notion.

1. Reasons for not accepting these arguments are given below, pp. ~~30, 31, 32~~ <sup>87, 89-93</sup>

2. Cf. Chapter three, pp. ~~119-122, 143, 146-150~~

To summarize these arguments: in general, if sociological generalizations are trivial in the sense of being obvious to common sense it does not follow that a historian can safely take them for granted in explaining particular events. It is not the case that such common-sensical sociological generalizations are of no theoretical interest. Moreover, Popper's contention that the historian does not take an interest in the theoretical part of his explanations yields a paradoxical conclusion to Popper's theory of historical explanation: that although historical explanations must fulfil certain formal requirements, which include presupposing universal laws, in order to be explanations - because the historian's line of interest is, according to Popper, restricted to specific events - he can, qua historian, have no guarantee that his explanations will be materially sound; because he is debarred, in Popper's view, from taking an interest in the status of the generalizations which his explanations logically require.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the "trivial general law" on which situational logic is based, there are cases in which several conflicting answers may be given as to what a rational action is, in certain situations; the ambiguity of the notion of rationality is clear-cut in a restricted class of cases. More generally, the assumption of rationality is not altogether trivial either in the sense of being unimportant or uninteresting. Further, if we consider what is involved in the characterization of rationality which Popper suggests with regard to situational logic - that a rational action is one that is in accordance with the logic of the situation,<sup>2</sup> or less tautologically, one that is appropriate to the situation - it will be seen that some explanations which satisfy this criterion may not involve universal laws, as Popper says the hypothetico-deductive method must; and the behaviour which is explained as appropriate to the situation may not be rational in any usual sense. Thus, what situational logic presupposes may be neither trivial, nor a general law, nor even "an element of rationality" in

1. Cf. below pp. ~~241~~ 93-95

2. OS, II, 97, for this characterization of rational behaviour.

"social situations". It may however also be the case that Popper does not now insist on these points, for there is no mention of the assumption, or "trivial general law", of rationality, in his later discussions of situational logic.<sup>1</sup>

To return to Popper's use of "trivial" to characterize the laws presupposed in historical explanation. The triviality of these laws must be a non-logical characteristic, for if it were a matter of logic, a distinction between those uses of the hypothetico-deductive method which employ trivial theories, and those which employ non-trivial theories, would be in order. And such a distinction might in turn provide an opening for claims that historical explanation has a distinctive logic, in spite of Popper's contention that causal explanation of particular events "very often" relies on trivial laws: for we cannot be sure in advance that we might not be interested in a specific event whose explanation refers to initial conditions that are its causes relative to some non-trivial laws. But this is only to say that the triviality of the laws presupposed in historical explanation must be a non-logical characteristic which is nevertheless of importance in methodology.

Several interpretations have been proposed for Popper's usage of "trivial" to characterize the laws presupposed in historical explanations. First, that the laws are tautologies or matters of definition.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation might be supported by Popper's reference to theories being "in the main" "implicit" in the historian's terminology<sup>3</sup>. But this interpretation would make the triviality of the laws a logical characteristic, and reasons have been given above for thinking that Popper might not want to accept this interpretation.

1. Cf. below chapter three pp. 123

2. W. Dray, "Professor Child on Neopositivism and History," Journal of Philosophy, 59(4)(1962), pp.100-6 distinguishes this and the following two interpretations of Popper's usage. He claims that Arthur Child ("Thoughts on the Historiology of Neopositivism," Journal of Philosophy, 57(1960) pp.665-74) argues, incorrectly according to Dray, for the first interpretation.

3. PH, p. 145.



Second, the laws are matters of common-sense, part of "common knowledge", and there is textual evidence to support this interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Third, the candidate laws for historical explanations are trivial as laws - "gross" generalizations of a specific event which have a single actual instance.<sup>2</sup> There is a fourth possible interpretation: that Popper uses trivial to indicate that such laws are "uninteresting" in a rather strong sense: that they are of no concern to the theoretician, with the corollary that the historian can take such laws for granted.

Dray argues that although Popper intends the laws to be trivial in the second sense of being "common knowledge", the outcome of the "covering law" theory of historical explanation in practice is that the laws used are trivial in the third sense, of being "gross generalizations" of the particular event explained. It is the relation between the second and fourth senses of trivial, in Popper's arguments, that will be discussed in what follows, the question being whether, if the laws are matters of common-sense knowledge, they are also of no concern to the theoretician.

One example Popper gives of the laws used in historical explanation suggests that he intends the laws to be understood as trivial in the second sense of being matters of "common knowledge". Thus

"If we say that the cause of the death of Giordano Bruno was being burnt at the stake, we do not need to mention the universal law that all living things die when exposed to intense heat. But such a law was tacitly assumed in our causal explanation." 3.

In a series of examples, however, Popper argues that the relevant laws are trivial in the fourth sense of being uninteresting to the theoretician, because they are trivial in the second sense of being matters of common-sense knowledge:

"If we explain, for example, the first division of Poland in 1772 by pointing out that it could not possibly resist the combined power of Russia, Prussia and Austria, then we are tacitly using some trivial universal law such as: 'If of two armies which are about equally well armed and led, one has a tremendous superiority

1. PH, p. 145.

2. W.H. Dray, op.cit., p.105.

3. PH, p.145.

in men, then the other never wins'...Such a law might be described as a law of the sociology of military power; but it is too trivial ever to raise a serious problem for the students of sociology, or to arouse their attention. Or if we explain Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon by his ambition and energy, say, then we are using some very trivial psychological generalizations which would hardly ever arouse the attention of a psychologist." 1.

Popper's argument that the historian's customary practice of explanation presupposes the hypothetico-deductive model requires that these laws be trivial in the fourth sense indicated above: for Popper insists that because such laws give no concern to the theoretician, the historian does, can and must take them for granted in his explanations. Thus Popper's analysis of historical explanation relies on both these senses of "trivial": that the laws used in historical explanation are matters of common-sense and that they do not draw the attention of the theoretician.

Popper seems to assume that these two senses of "trivial" are, if not equivalent, at least closely related, for he shifts in the course of his argument from the former sense to the latter: because the laws relevant to historical explanation are matters of common sense, they are uninteresting and can be taken for granted. I shall argue that Popper's sliding use of "trivial" on which much in his arguments depends, is untenable because there are generalizations which are trivial in the former sense which are not trivial in the latter sense. This weakness in Popper's argument has several consequences. One is that the historian cannot, qua historian, provide explanations which meet all the standards that Popper lays down for scientifically acceptable explanations; Popper's theory of historical explanation, in conjunction with his views on the historian's characteristic "line of interest", leads to the conclusion that although historical explanations must have the logical background of all causal

1. OS, II, 264-5. With regard to Popper's first example, a student of military history might argue that it makes a difference in the application of such a law, whether the smaller army is attacking or defending its own territory. With regard to the second example: whether this example involves a psychological generalization or a dispositional statement about one person, namely Caesar, which does not derive from a general law will be discussed below in chapter three pp. ~~444~~<sup>146-150</sup> with reference to the use of situational logic.

explanations to be explanations, they cannot satisfy the material requirements for acceptable explanations. This paradoxical result is due to Popper's insistence on his rigid demarcation of the historian's "line of interest".

The two senses of trivial fall apart because generalizations may seem obvious to common sense without being valid; and this circumstance can account, favourably, for the proliferation of sociological publications. There is an example in the literature of sociology which neatly rebuts the standard criticism that sociology deploys masses of data in more or less scientific formations, merely to reach conclusions which are matters of common-sense knowledge. A review of a study of American soldiers in the Second World War lists a number of platitudes about the behaviour of men in wartime, chiefly in relation to their social background, such as:

- "1. Better educated men showed more psycho-neurotic symptoms than those with less education. (The mental instability of the intellectual as compared with the more passive psychology of the man-in-the-street has often been commented on.)
2. Men from rural backgrounds were usually in better spirits than soldiers with city backgrounds. (After all, they are more accustomed to hardships.)
3. Southern soldiers were better able to stand the climate of the hot South Sea Islands than Northern soldiers (of course, Southerners are more accustomed to hot weather)
4. White privates were more eager to become non-coms than Negroes. (The lack of ambition among Negroes is almost proverbial).
5. Southern Negroes preferred Southern to Northern white officers. (Isn't it well known that Southern whites have a more fatherly attitude towards their 'darkies'?)
6. As long as the fighting continued, men were more eager to be returned to the States than they were after the German surrender. (You cannot blame people for not wanting to be killed.)" 1.

A gullible reader might find his previous assumptions confirmed in this list - but, the author continues - these truisms were refuted, not corroborated, in the course of the study. The correlations uncovered between background and behaviour reversed those posited by common sense.

1. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The American Soldier - an Expository Review," Public Opinion Quarterly, v. 13 (1949), p. 380



This example is generally used to argue that although sociological conclusions may be commonsensical, they are not simply platitudes restated in jargon.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the sociological apparatus is, rather, to determine which platitudes are falsified as a matter of fact, and thus to select the as yet unfalsified platitudes as conclusions of research: a procedure which accords with Popper's views on the method common to the natural and the social sciences.

In the present context, this example of the testing of truisms suggests that if the historian follows Popper's recommendation that the trivial laws which his explanations presuppose are no concern of his, he is not likely to provide satisfactory explanations. The trivial laws which his explanations presuppose are, for the most part, matters of common-sense knowledge, and common-sense generalizations are not always reliable in empirical questions to do with social life, as the above example indicates: such generalizations are not trivial in the sense of being uninteresting to the theoretician.

If the historian takes the relevant laws for granted in explaining, as Popper claims, and if one of the material requirements for a satisfactory explanation is, as Popper says, that the relevant universal laws be "well tested and corroborated", then the historian who provides Popperite explanations is in a fix. As a matter of course, the historian may not supply satisfactory explanations, and this is not because he does not exhibit or may not even be aware of the appropriate logical apparatus, but because the laws which suit his purposes and which he treats as unproblematical, are

1. Lazarfeld, op. cit., p.379-380 criticises the "argument...that surveys only put into complicated form observations which are already obvious to everyone", as follows:

"If we had mentioned the actual results of the investigation first, the reader would have labelled these 'obvious' also. Obviously something is wrong with the entire argument of 'obviousness'. It should really be turned on its head. Since every kind of human reaction is conceivable, it is of great importance to know which reactions actually occur most frequently and under what conditions; only then will a more advanced social science develop."

unreliable for material reasons. Given the persistently critical tenor of Popper's remarks on the standards of knowledge attainable in the practice of history, it is surprising that he does not make explicit this implication of his views: that even if the historian does satisfy the formal requirements for providing satisfactory explanations, he is more than likely not to satisfy the material requirements. Historical explanations may be chronically unsound even if their logical "background" has the form of scientific method, because generalizations may be trivial in the sense of being common knowledge without being trivial in the sense of being "uninteresting" and of no concern to the theoretician.

But Popper does not merely assert that the historian does not, as a matter of fact, concern himself with the laws which his explanations presuppose; Popper says that the historian can disregard these laws. This is a peculiar piece of prescriptive methodology: an invitation to the historian to provide satisfactory explanations by carefree reliance on questionable generalizations from common sense.

## 2. Popper's Characterization of the Historian's "Line of Interest"

The root of the difficulty discussed above lies in Popper's rigid demarcation of the historian's "line of interest":

"Generalization belongs simply to a different line of interest, sharply to be distinguished from that interest in specific events and their causal explanation which is the business of history. Those who are interested in laws must turn to the generalizing science (for example, to sociology)." 1.

It is worth noting that the theoretician's "line of interest" is not as restricted as the historian's: the theoretician may have no interest in the causal explanation of specific events as such, but only as a means to testing his conjectures, but to test hypotheses, he must use causal explanations which are scientifically acceptable, for otherwise his results might

1. OS, II, 264.

be discarded as inconclusive, and he could not be said to have tested a hypothesis. Thus the demarcations of the historian's and the theoretician's respective "lines of interest" are not quite parallel.

Popper might argue for this inequality on epistemological grounds, for he maintains that theory or conjecture is logically prior to the observation or apprehension of particulars. This is his "searchlight theory" of knowledge, which he opposes to contrasts with the "bucket theory of mind" of classical empiricism.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the logical structure of theories is such that they transcend any collection of supporting data: a theory applies to all instances of the kind specified, not just to those collections of instances compiled by experimenters. It is on these epistemological grounds that Popper rejects induction as confused: scientific theories cannot be generalizations from a collection of instances because this procedure omits just what makes such theories powerful, which is their transcendence of any limited collection of instances; they apply to the future as well as the past.

Popper's argument from epistemology is sufficient to invalidate any claim on the part of the historian to theorize inductively on the basis of an investigation of the specific events which are his "line of interest". What debars the historian from conjecturing, as a Popperite scientist would, seems to be Popper's insistence on a rigid demarcation between the historical and the theoretical sciences. Popper insists that generalization is radically different from the historian's characteristic interest in specific events because, I think, he wants to leave no openings for what he calls historicism: both the claim criticized, and called Historismus by Carl Menger, that the basis of the social sciences is in the historical outlook from which theories derive;<sup>2</sup> and also those claims to prophesy the future

1. On these two theories, OS, II, 213-214 and OS, II, 260.

2. Carl Menger, Problems of Economics and Sociology (a translation of Untersuchungen über die Methode der Sozialwissenschaften und der Politischen Ökonomie insbesondere) ed. and with an introduction by Louis Schneider, trans. by Francis J. Nock (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1963) Cf. PH 33-34, 39-41, 45, 50, OS. I, 7, OS, II 37 and OS II 319 note 2 to chapter 13.



on the basis of past evidence, which Popper also decries as historicist. Popper, then, prohibits the historian from theorizing because he considers that theories claiming to be historically based have been historicist; and this is his reason for reaffirming, or perhaps restating, the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic disciplines, and assigning history strictly to the latter.

The grounds on which Popper justifies his prohibition of theorizing to the professional historian are Popper's considerations as to the limitations of historical evidence: the historian cannot conjecture and attempt to refute his conjectures, because in general historical evidence will not provide tests for hypotheses.<sup>1</sup> Because the paradigm of scientific experiments does not fit, Popper neglects the claims that can be made for a critical approach to historical evidence. Popper's chief argument against using historical evidence to test hypotheses is that because the limited historical sources record events from the witness's point of view they can rarely be tested by further evidence, or even criticized, and must be taken at face value.<sup>2</sup> But it will be seen in chapter ~~four~~<sup>five</sup> that this argument does not stand up to examination: that it is possible to criticize a historical source just because the informant recorded events from a point of view which he did not apply with complete consistency. Nor is historical evidence as

1. Cf. chapter five below where these arguments are developed more fully.

2. Popper seems by now to have modified his views on this point; cf. the discussion of the objectivity of situational logic ~~below~~ and in chapters ~~three and~~<sup>three and</sup> four. Cf. also CR, p.23, where Popper says in criticism of the observationalist programme of asking for the sources of knowledge, that historical work is an exception to its general untenability:

"Testing an historical assertion always means going back to sources; but not, as a rule, to the reports of eyewitnesses."

"Clearly no historian will accept the evidence of documents uncritically. There are problems of genuineness, there are problems of bias, and there are also such problems as the reconstruction of earlier sources."

"On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance", CR, p.23.

But in allowing that a historian can criticise documents, Popper has, I think, withdrawn the basis of his earlier argument that most historical interpretations must be circular.

limited as Popper suggests. Historians use more than written documents, and not all the written documents they use are characterized by points of view in the sense that Popper describes.

Popper, in arguing that historical theories are generally untestable, assumes that the relevant historical evidence is finite and has already been discovered; this same belief led Lord Acton to assert optimistically, seventy odd years ago, that it was then possible to write definitive history. But new evidence may be discovered in almost all fields of history; and the use of the historian's critical techniques may put a new face on evidence already discovered, by showing its significance to be different from what has been thought. And in some fields of history the available evidence is immense, and difficult for any one historian or perhaps even a team of historians to exhaust; so that Popper's claim that

"in history...the facts at our disposal are often severely limited"<sup>1</sup> seems sadly inappropriate.

Thus historical evidence is not as unsuitable for testing hypotheses as Popper contended in The Open Society; its limitations, by comparison with that segment of scientific evidence which is gained by controlled experiments, need not constitute an insuperable barrier to generalizing on the part of the historian, should he care to do so.

Moreover, recourse to controlled experiments is not a sine qua non for testing hypotheses, for astronomical and geological hypotheses may be tested by observations. Popper's later defence of situational logic as a method which the historian can use, which consists of hypotheses that are "in principle, objectively testable" indicates that he may not still insist on the points that he expounded earlier as to the limitations of historical evidence.<sup>2</sup>

But even if Popper's case against historical evidence does not stand up to examination and has not, so to speak, stood up to the test of time,

1. OS, II, 265

2. Cf. chapter five.



in that Popper seems to have modified his views on this point, Popper might still be correct in characterizing the historian's interest as directed towards, and indeed restricted to, specific events and in claiming that:

"Generalization belongs simply to a different line of interest, sharply to be distinguished from that interest in specific events and their causal explanation which is the business of history" 1.

For even if the resources were available to the historian for generalizing, in the shape of suitable evidence for testing his conjectures, he still might not care to do so. Certainly the historian is a "consumer" 2. of theories formulated and tested in other disciplines; and his use of such theories is in general to bring them to bear upon specific events. Popper, as has been seen, characterizes the historian's use of universal laws as for the most part, "implicit", "tacit" or unconscious; universal laws are an implicit but logically necessary constituent of the historian's causal explanations of specific events; and sociological theories and sociological models are "implicit in [the historian's] terminology" 3.

It has been argued by Joynt and Rescher that the historian may also be a "producer" 4. of restricted generalization. I should like to consider what such limited generalizations are like, and the uses to which the historian may put them, as indicating that, contrary to Popper's statements, the historian may have an interest in generalizing. Popper would, I think, probably raise some objections to the enterprise described by Joynt and Rescher, but I think that these objections can be met.

Joynt and Rescher characterize restricted generalizations as

1. OS, II, 264.

2. Carey B. Joynt and Nicholas Rescher, "The Problem of Uniqueness in History", History and Theory, vol. I no.2, p.158: hereafter cited as Joynt and Rescher, "Uniqueness".

3. PH, 147; the kind of models which are "implicit in [the historian's] terminology" are discussed below in chapter three in connection with situational logic, and also in chapter six, in connection with methodological individualism.



"'law-like' statements limited in applicability by explicit or oblique use of proper names (or places, periods of time, systems of technology, or the like..." 1.

As an example of such generalizations they offer the statement:

"In the seafights of sailing vessels in the period of 1653-1805 (that is, from the battle of Texel to that of Trafalgar), large formations were too cumbersome for effectual control as single units"

Such statements are not simply summations of particular events; they are lawlike in that they imply that if the relevant conditions, e.g., of naval warfare, were "reinstated", then the same tactics would again be applicable.<sup>3</sup> But such generalizations are limited and not universally valid, in that their applicability depends on "the fulfilment of conditions" "which could but cannot reasonably be expected to recur" because

"such limited generalizations are rooted in transitory regularities deriving from the existence of temporally restricted technological or institutional patterns". 4.

It falls to the historian to formulate such restricted generalizations just because the scientist, although he could do so, has nothing to gain from formulating limited generalizations rather than the universal laws "which are the main focus of his interest".<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the historian has an interest in just such generalizations for explanatory purposes, for which universal laws do not suffice;<sup>6</sup> his interest is reinforced by the limitations of the data available to him.<sup>7</sup> Rescher and Joynt say that the historian's interest in such generalizations is as part of his "explanatory mission and...focus upon specific particulars;<sup>8</sup> but there are two uses, I think, which the historian may make of such restricted generalisations,

1. C.B. Joynt and Nicholas Rescher, "On Explanation in History", Mind N.S. 68(1959), p.388; hereafter cited as Joynt and Rescher, "Explanation".

2. Joynt and Rescher, "Uniqueness", p.156.

3. Joynt and Rescher, "Explanation", p.384-5, and "Uniqueness", p.156-7. Joynt and Rescher say in "Uniqueness", p.156-7, that such generalizations "exert counterfactual force"

4. Joynt and Rescher, "Explanation", p.385 and "Uniqueness", p.156-7.

5. Joynt and Rescher, "Uniqueness", p.158 and "Explanation", p.385.

6. Joynt and Rescher, "Explanation", pp.387-388.

7. Joynt and Rescher, "Explanation", p.385.

8. Joynt and Rescher, "Uniqueness", p.158.

which should be distinguished. He may of course use them to explain specific events, and he may also use them to characterize the "temporally restricted technological or institutional patterns" characteristic of historical periods. Such patterns are in a sense particular, large-scale facts, but they are patterns as well; and the historian's interest in them is in part because they give rise to transitory regularities relevant to explaining men's actions throughout the period for which they are valid. And if the preceding argument is valid, then historians do have an interest in formulating and testing such restricted generalizations.

Such "transitory regularities" help to specify the "problem situation of a period" which is Popper's suggestion for making sense of "the puzzling fact that there are such things as historical periods."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, such limited generalizations may be ~~what is~~ involved in the "situational analysis" which Popper now thinks is "the main feature of historical explanation".<sup>2</sup> ~~If this last point is valid, then~~ Situational logic may not presuppose the hypothetico-deductive model as Popper has defended it, for ~~then~~ explanations in terms of situational logic may not involve laws of unrestricted validity.

The remarks which Popper makes in The Poverty of Historicism, and in some of his writings on scientific methodology, suggest that he would probably raise two objections to Rescher and Joynt's argument. Popper's several arguments for generalizations being of unrestricted validity have been considered above; it has been suggested that Popper's attempt to guard against the threat of conventionalism does not require that restricted generalizations must be rejected as unsound because they are vulnerable to manoeuvres to discount falsifying evidence by adding ad hoc qualifications. The mental constructions which are scientific laws, in the conventionalist view, may be open to ad hoc augmentation in this evasive and unscientific way, but such restricted generalizations as Rescher and Joynt propose are based on "institutional and technological patterns" which are not simply mental creations but matters open to objective investigation. Moreover,

1. Popper, HE, p.22.

2. HE, p.21; cf. below chapter three ~~pp~~

the safeguard against ad hoc qualifications, as has been argued above,<sup>1.</sup> does not rest on formal requirements such as unrestricted validity but on the institutions of scientific objectivity: of inter-subjective testing and criticism. If the restrictions are indicated under which such generalizations hold, then ad hoc supplementations can be recognised as such, and generalizations of this kind do not suffer from the defects of scientific theories as understood by conventionalism.

Second, Popper would probably contend that such statements as Rescher and Joynt describe state what he calls trends: for they depend on certain "initial conditions" which specify the circumstances under which the restricted generalizations apply. Popper says he has no objection to the use of trends, if the dependence of trends on "initial conditions" is recognized; his "quarrel" is with historicists who project such trends unconditionally into the future as historical prophecies.<sup>2.</sup> And clearly such restricted generalizations as Rescher and Joynt analyse, by stipulation, cannot be extrapolated unconditionally into the future, because they refer to "temporally restricted technological and institutional patterns"; they are not, then, liable to the misuses of historicist prophecy.

But elsewhere Popper characterizes "a statement asserting the existence of a trend" as "existential":

"a singular historical statement, not a universal law".<sup>3.</sup>

And this characterization cannot be reconciled with Rescher and Joynt's analysis of the force of restricted generalizations. According to Popper,

"historical hypotheses are, as a rule, not universal but singular statements about one individual event, or a number of such events".<sup>4.</sup>

Such generalizations as Rescher and Joynt describe are not singular statements; they are law-like and "exert counter-factual force". The example considered above does not merely summarize salient features of successful tactics in the sea-battles fought between 1653 and 1805, it asserts that

1. Cf. above, pp. ~~45~~ 70-71  
3. PH, 110.

2. PH, 128-9.  
4. PH, 107.



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"for example, that had Villeneuve issued from Cadiz some days earlier or later he would all the same have encountered difficulty in the management of the great allied battle fleet of over thirty sail of the line, and Nelson's stratagem of dividing his force into two virtually independent units under prearranged plans would have facilitated effective management equally well as at Trafalgar". 1.

Thus, this restricted generalization is "law-like" in that it has the characteristic which Popper ascribes to scientific laws, of transcending any particular collection, even though it does not have the unrestricted validity which Popper argues that scientific laws must have to fulfil the explanatory "aim of science". Consequently, such hypotheses cannot be singular statements even if they cannot qualify as scientific laws in Popper's eyes.

The historian's interest in formulating restricted generalizations such as these makes it necessary to correct Popper's characterization of the historian's "line of interest" which has been seen to raise difficulties in the theory of historical explanation which it was meant to support. The historian's interest is not, as Popper claims, only in specific events. He is also interested in describing the "institutional or technological patterns" characteristic of historical periods, in terms of restricted generalizations, which have law-like force and which are not untestable "points of view". Moreover, this use by the historian of restricted generalizations suggests that there is an important respect in which the distinction between an interest in generalization and in specific events may not be as sharp as Popper contends, in his analysis of the pre-suppositions of historical explanation. For restricted generalizations, and descriptions and explanations of specific events may be interwoven, so to speak, in historical writing, for the purpose of characterizing periods in the past.

Although the historian has not been transformed into a theoretician on a par with the physicist, as some reformers have desired, the several functions of restricted generalizations in historical work suggest that the historian has more than the purely idiographic interest to which Popper restricted him.

1. Joynt and Rescher, "Uniqueness", p. 157.

## Chapter Three

## Situational Logic

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## Chapter Three. Situational Logic

## I. Introduction

Much of the discussion of the Popper-Hempel theory of historical explanation has been concerned with whether the proposed model can be applied in actual historical explanation. Popper's reaction to this discussion is, as has been seen, disparaging. One reason for this, I have suggested, is the turn taken by the subsequent discussion: insofar as it referred to Popper's views on historical explanation, it misconstrued his purposes in proposing the analysis he did of historical explanations: Popper's purposes were largely critical rather than constructive. In discussing historical explanation in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society Popper was concerned to combat views that he associated with historicism: first that the methods of history and the social sciences differ in kind from those of the natural sciences; and second, that knowledge of the past can provide a basis for saying what the future will be like. But the analysis of historical explanation which Popper gives, in pursuit of his critical purposes, is not altogether satisfactory as an account of historical explanation.

My criticisms of Popper's analysis have centred on Popper's usages of trivial, by which he attempted to reconcile the historian's characteristic direction of interest in specific events with his implicit use of the hypothetico-deductive method in giving explanations of such events; and on Popper's restriction of the historian's "line of interest" to specific events and their causal explanation, a restriction from which Popper argued that historical laws are a contradiction in terms.<sup>1</sup> The contentions on which Popper relied to counter doctrines he attributed to historicism thus led to his defending a model of historical explanation which is not satisfactory. Popper says as much in the above-mentioned interview on historical

1. OS, II, 264

"For from our point of view, there can be no historical laws. Generalization belongs simply to a different line of interest, sharply to be distinguished from that interest in specific events and their causal explanation which is the business of history."



explanation: that this model does not give an adequate account of historical explanation, but that his theory of situational logic does just that.

Situational logic, which Popper considers to be the issue of his theory of historical explanation, is undoubtedly relevant to a large and important class of historical explanations. It has the considerable merit of stressing the importance of objective conditions for explaining the actions of people in the past.<sup>1</sup> Whether such objective conditions, as Popper understands them, exhaust the aspects of historical situations which are relevant to historical explanations is another matter: it might be argued that some notion of the agent's view of the situation is also required, and that empathic understanding is involved in situational analysis and thus in historical explanation. As we shall see, Popper defends his theory of situational logic from these objections by insisting that the ostensibly psychological aspects of action which are relevant to its explanation, can and must be described in terms of objective features of the situation.<sup>2</sup> Whether Popper's answer is satisfactory can best be determined by considering situational logic.

That objective conditions must be considered for historical explanations to be adequate is an important point, but it is not sufficient to establish that situational logic as Popper presents it is an adequate theory of historical explanation. Before considering in detail what Popper has said about situational logic, I shall indicate several critical and positive methodological points, in connection with which Popper presents situational logic; for Popper's discussions of situational logic will seem opaque if no mention is made of the purposes for which he proposes and defends it. Then, with reference to how situational logic works in practice, I shall consider whether it succeeds in eliminating what Popper criticizes and maintaining what he defends.

1. Cf. W.B. Gallie's discussion of Popper's situational logic, Philosophy and the Historical Understanding (London, 1964) p.118.

"Failure to see what the objective possibilities were in a given historical situation is probably the commonest cause of miscalculating or for failing entirely to appreciate the intentions and plans of the agents involved."

2. See section V below, pp. ~~55~~ 140-143

Although Popper's purposes in proposing and defending situational logic can be distinguished as critical and constructive, his critical and constructive points turn out to be closely related. One class of problems is raised by the relation of situational logic to other methodological doctrines to which Popper is committed: methodological individualism and the hypothetico-deductive method, whose various and ubiquitous uses constitute the unity of scientific method. A second problem is the success of Popper's attempt to establish, by means of situational logic, that there is no need, nor indeed any place, for empathic or intuitive understanding in history and the social sciences. Popper makes this attempt partly through his critique of one of the several associations which psychologism has, in his usage: namely, the use of psychology in historical and social explanations.

Popper links his recommendation of situational logic with methodological individualism: the relations between these two doctrines is examined in chapter ~~five~~<sup>six</sup>, below. The "zero method" of constructing models, from which situational logic derives - that is, the construction of models on the assumption that "the individuals concerned" acted rationally - clearly presupposes that such models are individualistic. The models of "political situations" and "social movements", which Popper recommends to social scientists and historians, are to be models constructed and analysed "in terms of individuals", of their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc....<sup>2</sup>. The upshot of this combination of methodological individualism and situational logic is, according to Popper, that insofar as sociological theory refers to social collectives, it makes use of

"abstract models constructed to interpret certain selected relations between individuals." 2.

This result disposes of two linked doctrines of historicism: methodological essentialism, or the belief that social collectives really exist and therefore have essences; and the belief that these essences can be grasped by intuition.<sup>3</sup>

~~But the preceding analysis has only skimmed the surface. Historicists~~

1. PH, 136, 149.

2. PH, 140; cf. PH, 136, 149.

3. PH, 136; cf. Below pp. 911

But the preceding analysis has only skimmed the surface. Historicists put forward such untenable doctrines as methodological essentialism and intuitive understanding due to their understandable - and indeed justifiable dissatisfaction with history as it is practised.<sup>1</sup> Popper thinks that there are grounds, but perhaps not those which the historicist defends, for a dissatisfaction with history as it stands; situational logic, according to Popper, is part of a sensible answer to the historicist's demand for a reform of history, and it is also part of Popper's solution for the defects of history which give rise to this dissatisfaction.

A recurrent bogey in Popper's presentation of situational logic is psychologism. It will be seen that Popper uses this term with associations beyond its literal reference. He is against what he says psychologism stands for: the attempt to explain social events solely in terms of social psychology. But his objections to psychologism are also directed against claims for empathic understanding, as well as against the more general claim that history and the social sciences, because they deal with human action, require methods that are distinctive, because their subject matter must be apprehended by subjective means. Popper, as will be seen, argues that these fields have "an entirely objective method" at their disposal, situational logic, which suffices for their purposes.<sup>2</sup>

That is, the reverse side of Popper's attempt to combat what he calls psychologism is his claim that situational logic is objective. In the main, Popper gives two related, but not equivalent, characterizations of what he means by "objective": a statement is objective if it is in principle testable;<sup>3</sup> and a statement is objective if inter-subjective agreement can be

1. PH, 148-150

2. In "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 14(1962) Theses 25 and 26, pp.246-7; hereafter cited as ISW.

3. E.G. in HE, p.21; also LSD, p.44, cf. the next footnote.



reached on it.<sup>1</sup> If a statement is in principle testable, it is possible to reach intersubjective agreement on it, but intersubjective agreement can be reached on logical truths which cannot be tested in any real sense; thus Popper's second characterization of objectivity in terms of the possibility of reaching intersubjective agreement is more comprehensive<sup>2</sup> than is his characterization of objectivity in terms of the possibility, in principle, of testing the relevant statements.

Whether situational logic in use can satisfy either or both of these standards will be considered below. In chapter four below it is suggested that if the historian is as limited by his reliance on sources organized by untestable points of view as Popper has argued in the last chapter of The Open Society, then it is difficult to see how the historian can use situational logic if it is objective in the first sense, as Popper claims in his interview on historical explanation. In other words, Popper's later defence of situational logic is inconsistent with his earlier critique of history. These two conflicting arguments do have some connection in that both are directed against doctrines which Popper attributes to the influence of what he calls historicism on history and the social sciences. Popper's critique of historical evidence is meant to show that no objective patterns can be established in past events, from which predictions could be made; and Popper defends situational logic as a method of objective understanding in an attempt to show that there is no need for empathic understanding in history and the social sciences. But this connection is, I think, rather flimsy: for it is argued in the chapter on historicism below, that an anti-naturalistic historicist may subscribe to any of several doctrines of empathic or intuitive understanding without being committed to the pro-naturalistic

1. This is Popper's effective criterion for the objectivity of situational logic, LSW, p.247. In a note, added in 1959 to LSD, p.44, Popper says that he has "since generalized" the first characterization of objectivity cited above

"inter-subjective testing is merely a very important aspect of the more general idea of inter-subjective criticism, or...of...mutual rational control by critical discussion..."

Popper's effective criterion of objectivity, noted above, derives from this more general idea, in that if a statement withstands intersubjective criticism it is then intersubjectively acceptable.

2. Cf. the preceding footnote.

belief in objective patterns of history which license predictions.

A point related to whether situational logic is objective in the sense that "everything about it is, in principle...testable"<sup>1</sup> is whether situational logic makes implicit use of the hypothetico-deductive method. In The Open Society Popper presents situational logic as a special case of the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation in which the "trivial general law" "tacitly assume[d]" is that

"sane persons as a rule act more or less rationally".<sup>2</sup>

Popper presents situational logic, in The Poverty of Historicism, as related to the "zero method" of constructing models on a similar assumption; and the technique of constructing models in general, he argues, is an instance of hypothetico-deductive method. In the later interview on historical explanation, Popper's description of situational logic as "far removed" from the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation<sup>3</sup> would seem, on the face of it, to be a retraction of his earlier presentation of situational logic as a particular case of this model. It might be argued, amid controversy, that explanations in terms of the agents' reasons, which, it would seem, must certainly enter situational logic at some point are in some way fundamentally different from explanations in terms of causes. Whether Popper would agree to this point, and whether this is what he means in saying that situational logic is "far removed" from the hypothetico-deductive model of causal explanation, remains to be seen. Again, the relation of situational logic to the hypothetico-deductive model of explanation is a question to be settled by investigating how situational logic, as Popper understands it, is used in historical explanation.

My presentation of situational logic will be composite, drawing on what Popper says in four publications. Popper, in discussing the logic of historical explanation in The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism, mentions situational logic as an instance of the hypothetico-deductive model which is much used in historical explanation: a special case which

1. HE, p.21.

2. OS, II, 265

3. HE, p. 22.

"tacitly assumes, as a kind of first approximation, the trivial general law that sane persons as a rule act more or less rationally." 1.

That is, Popper argues that the use, by "the best historians", of situational logic<sup>2</sup> supports his contention that actual historical explanation presupposes the hypothetico-deductive model. In addition to his references to situational logic in the course of arguing that there is no distinctive logic of historical explanation, Popper gives some indications in these two works of what he thinks situational logic involves.

In two later publications, the interview on historical explanation mentioned above, and a lecture on "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", Popper returns to the topic of situational logic. Nearly fifteen and nearly twenty years separate the first publications of The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism from that of the interview and that of "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", respectively, and there are some notable differences in what Popper has to say about situational logic in these later works. He now says that situational logic is "far removed" from hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation, whereas earlier, he had presented situational logic as a special case of this model. The assumption of rationality on the part of the actors, which was a prominent point in his presentation of situational logic in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, is not mentioned explicitly in his later publications. Lastly, the conflict of Popper's characterization of situational logic as an objective technique of historical explanation, with his earlier critique of historical evidence, has already been mentioned.

Nonetheless, the major difficulties that I see in Popper's conception of situational logic do not arise from his saying different things about it at different times. Some of these difficulties come from the relations of situational logic to Popper's other methodological stipulations mentioned above: whether situational logic will in practice preserve methodological individualism as Popper defends the latter<sup>3</sup>; and whether psychologism can

1. OS, II, 265

2. PH, 149

3. See below, chapter ~~five~~<sup>Six</sup>.



he excluded if situational logic is to provide adequate historical explanations,<sup>1</sup>. A related difficulty is due to Popper's consistent attempt to establish that the historian can dispense with empathic understanding by relying on that method of "objective understanding" which Popper describes as situational logic. The conflict of the objectivity of situational logic with Popper's denial of objectivity to the practice of history becomes pronounced through Popper's more explicit development of the purposes for which he first introduced situational logic as a major item in the methodology of the social sciences.

## II. Situational Logic in The Poverty of Historicism.

It was noted above that Popper wrote in The Open Society that historians, in explaining, make most use of one particular assumption, in conjunction with describing the "initial conditions" or situation of the event to be explained: namely, "the trivial general law that sane people as a rule act more or less rationally"<sup>2</sup>. The logic of this kind of explanation can best be explicated at the level of sociological theory, and it is for this reason that some of Popper's remarks in The Poverty of Historicism provide a more direct approach to the central points about situational logic than do his comments in The Open Society.

Situational logic derives from a particular case of a technique which is more widely used in the social sciences, Popper says, than is commonly recognised: namely, the use of models. Since he argues that historians make tacit use of sociological theory, among other things, in their work, this feature of the social sciences clearly redounds on history. The use of models in the social sciences, Popper says, supports his contention that

1. See below, section VI

2. OS, II, 265

the methods of the social sciences do not differ in any fundamental respect from those of the natural sciences, since the construction of

"certain models...in order to explain certain experiences -  
a familiar theoretical method in the natural sciences -  
...is part of the method of explanation by way of  
reduction, or deduction from hypotheses" 1.

In fact, most of the objects of the social sciences are just such theoretical constructions.

"Even 'the war' or 'the army' are abstract concepts, strange as this may sound to some. What is concrete is the many who are killed; or the men and women in uniform, etc." 2.

This result demolishes two connected historicist doctrines: methodological essentialism, and the doctrine that history and the social sciences require intuitive methods to apprehend their objects. Methodological essentialism is the mistaken belief that such theoretical models are "concrete things", essences "either within or behind the changing observable events". 3.

Popper has argued, in connection with his presentation of historicism, that methodological essentialism "is closely related to" the doctrine that intuitive understanding is a distinctive method required in the social sciences:<sup>4</sup> for the essences mistakenly thought to be implicated in the objects of the social sciences can be apprehended only by intuition. Thus, by making clear how extensively models or theoretical constructions are used in the social sciences, Popper has refuted two characteristic doctrines of anti-naturalistic historicism offered in support of the claim that the social sciences require distinctive methods.

For polemical purposes, I think, Popper presents the "zero method" of constructing models as the only "difference" between the methods of the natural and those of the social sciences which is not just a difference "of degree"<sup>5</sup>. This allegedly distinctive method consists in

1. PH, 135.

2. PH, 135

3. PH, 136. Popper says that the common difficulties in recognising such theoretical constructions as models "explains" methodological essentialism: that they are models "destroys" it.

4. PH, 31.

5. PH, 141.

"constructing a model on the assumption of complete rationality (and perhaps also on the assumption of the possession of complete information) on the part of all the individuals concerned, and of estimating the deviation of the actual behaviour from the model behaviour, using the latter as a kind of zero co-ordinate.

Clearly if the method of constructing models in the social sciences is itself hypothetico-deductive and, as Popper has said, "a familiar theoretical method in the natural sciences,"<sup>2</sup> then the construction of models on a particular assumption cannot involve a method which is different in kind; it can only be a special technique, a particular application of the method which Popper claims is common to the natural and the social sciences, the hypothetico-deductive method.<sup>3</sup> The reason for Popper's choice of phrase in presenting "the method of logical or rational construction" as "perhaps the most important difference" between the methods of the natural and the social sciences is, I think, the following. One argument often brought in support of the claim that history and the social sciences require methods different in kind from those of the natural sciences is that their subject matter is considered to be far more complicated than that of the natural sciences because the former study human beings:

"in sociology we are faced with...a complexity due to the fact that social life is a natural phenomenon that presupposes the mental life of individuals..."

It has been seen, above, that this argument is one that Popper ascribes to anti-naturalistic historicism - although his argument against large-scale social planning based on social predictions relies on indistinguishable considerations -<sup>5</sup> and that the argument from complexity has been used to back the claim that the logic of historical explanation must be different in kind from that of scientific explanation. Popper argues that the zero method of constructing models is particularly useful in the social sciences just because there is an important respect in which

"social science is less complicated than physics, [and]... concrete social situations are in general less complicated than concrete physical situations. For in most social

1. PH, 141.

2. PH, 135; cf. above ~~PH, pp. 135-136~~ <sup>12-14</sup> 3. PH, 137

4. PH, 12.

5. Cf. above ~~Chap II, 22-23~~ <sup>76-81</sup>



situations, if not in all, there is an element of rationality. Admittedly, human beings hardly ever act quite rationally (i.e. as they would if they could make the optimal use of all available information for the attainment of whatever ends they may have), but they act, none the less, more or less rationally; and this makes it possible to construct comparatively simple models of their actions and inter-actions, and to use these models as approximations." 1.

Thus Popper argues that the comparative complexities of the natural and the social sciences are the reverse of what has been claimed in the arguments for distinctive methods in the latter. The "zero method" of constructing models relies on the relatively less complex character of social life; it indicates a methodological difference between the natural and the social sciences only in the sense that it is a "comparatively simple" case of the methods which they have in common. It is, I think, indicative of the concerns with which Popper develops situational logic that he uses this conception to argue against various claims that investigation of the subject matter of the social sciences requires special techniques of understanding as part of the methods of these disciplines. The claim that social phenomena have essences which can only be grasped by intuition is easily dismissed, as has been seen. The claim that empathic understanding is necessary to explain men's motives and aims is more serious, and it is to this contention that Popper returns in his later discussions of situational logic.

Although Popper argues that many characteristic historicist doctrines are based on misunderstandings, he allows that nonetheless "there are some sound elements in historicism" which are largely due to the historicist's dissatisfaction with the established view of history

"merely as the story of great tyrants and great generals".<sup>2</sup>.

1. PH, 140-1

2. PH, p.148-9; cf. chapter 25, OS, e.g. OS, II, 270, where Popper castigates the equation of history with "the history of power politics" on the grounds that the latter

"is nothing but the history of international crime and mass murder".

Thus, "historicism answers a real need",<sup>1</sup> for what has been taken to be "the history of power politics"<sup>2</sup> is, Popper argues in the last chapter of The Open Society, a history of infamy. Popper objects to this view of history on moral grounds; the historicist considers concentration on the heroes in history to be narrow and superficial, and argues for a reform of history by

"a sociology which plays the role of a theoretical history, or a theory of historical development...[and] the historicist idea of 'periods'; of the 'spirit' or 'style' of an age; of irresistible historical tendencies; of movements which captivate the minds of individuals and which surge on like a flood, driving, rather than being driven by, individual men." 3.

But these suggested reforms do not, Popper argues, attack the moral problem of the history of political power - they disguise and preserve this view of history which Popper wants to expose and destroy.<sup>4</sup>

Popper offers his proposal of situational logic as part of a sensible answer to the historicist's "demand for a reform of history" 5. Popper's arguments here are for the most part obscure, but the points which follow are ones on which, I think, Popper would insist. If situational logic is applied, history is seen to be more than a bare account of the actions of individual men such as political leaders - "the story of great tyrants and great generals" to which historicists "rightly object" - for men such as these acted in situations, which were shaped by the "decisions and actions of countless unknown individuals" 6. Thus the heroes of history did not influence events as much as has been mistakenly thought; their actions can be explained, rather, in terms of the "logic of the situation". Popper would insist, however, that no political leader who did bad things could be absolved or justified on the grounds that he was a victim of his situation, for situational logic is not, in Popper's view, deterministic.

Popper's presentation of situational logic in The Poverty of Historicism is rather allusive. The "zero method" of constructing models seems to be presupposed, in accordance with Popper's theory of historical explanation as

1. PH, p. 148.

2. OS, II, 270.

3. PH, p.147-8.

4. Cf. OS, II, 269-80, sec. iv, in chapter 25, "Has History Any Meaning?"; cf. also section VIII, chapter four below.

5. PH, p. 147.

6. PH, p.148.

prescribed in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, and attention is concentrated on what Popper calls "the logic of events", for "the detailed determination of...action by...the logic of the situation"<sup>1</sup>. As an example of the "use, more or less unconsciously, of this conception" by "the best historians" Popper instances Tolstoy

"when he describes how it was not decision but 'necessity' which made the Russian army yield Moscow without a fight and withdraw to places where it could find food." 2.

There are now laws or plans operative in "the logic of events"<sup>3</sup> and Popper would undoubtedly hold that such an explanation is not deterministic. The "logic of events" results from "the decisions and actions of countless individuals" which cannot themselves be determined because of the "uncertainty of the human factor",<sup>4</sup> and consequently there can be no overall determinism. There are no supra-individual forces at work, for insofar as institutions and other allegedly collective entities influence or shape events, they are to be recognised as "theoretical constructions" and analysed "in terms of individuals..."<sup>5</sup>. Thus, according to Popper, the use of situational logic demolishes yet another historicist doctrine, that of historical determinism. Popper's argument to this effect is obscure, and I have filled it in with his characteristic doctrines, but the point, that situational logic is not deterministic, is one on which he would, I think, insist.

The other major items in Popper's counter-proposal are that historical interpretations be recognised as no more than untestable points of view and not, as is one of the "cardinal errors" of historicism,<sup>6</sup> as theories which are testable and for that reason objective. Popper also recommends "something like an analysis of social movements" in terms of models:<sup>7</sup> that is,

"our individualistic and institutionalistic models of such collective entities as nations, or governments, or markets...by models of political situations as well as of social movements such as scientific and industrial progress." 8.

1. OS, II, 97

2. PH, 149.

3. PH, 148; cf. Popper's argument, OS, II, 85 that "no kind of determinism" is "a necessary assumption of scientific method".

4. PH, 148; PH, 69 and PH, 158.

5. PH, 135-6

6. PH, 151

7. Popper is indefinite as to whether such an analysis is "a part of" situational logic or "beyond" it (PH, 149)

8. PH, 149.



Popper says further that

"...these models may then be used by historians, partly like the other models, and partly for the purpose of explanation, along with the other universal laws they use." 1.

That is, a historian "uses" such "'models' provided by sociological analysis" "usually unconsciously" "as implicit in his terminology" 2. although the example of Tolstoy shows that a historian may evoke the numerous and anonymous individuals who constituted such a theoretical construction as the Russian army in the war of 1812 - or he takes such models for granted in explaining specific events.

The first part of Popper's proposal appears to resemble the fashionable and familiar suggestion that historians should make a greater use of the social sciences, but it is difficult to see how Popper can reconcile such a reform with his restriction of the historian's "line of interest" to specific events; for if the historian can take no interest in generalizing, how can he recognize that the sociological models which he takes for granted are "theoretical constructions" and not, reprehensibly, mistake them for "concrete things"? 3. How is the historian to discriminate in his practice, between his use of those models of political situations and social movements of which Popper approves, and an avoidance of such historicist notions as "the 'spirit' or 'style' of an age", 4. other than by rote? If Popper is to maintain his earlier characterization of the historian's "line of interest", 5. then his proposed reform in response to the historicist's dissatisfaction must, it would seem, stop short of affecting the historian's practice, and then Popper has not answered the historicist's demand for a reform of history.

1. PH, 149.

2. PH, 145

3. PH. 135-6

4. PH, 147.

5. Which has been criticized above, cf. pp. ~~977~~

### III. Situational Logic in The Open Society

In The Open Society, Popper indicates several sources for situational logic:

"The analysis of situations, the situational logic, plays a very important part in social life as well as in the social sciences. It is, in fact, the method of economic analysis" 1.

The method of economic analysis to which Popper refers is what F.A. von Hayek calls pure economic theory: "the logic of choice".<sup>2</sup> But this method is not limited to economics:

"As to an example outside economics, I refer to the 'logic of power' which we may use in order to explain the moves of power politics as well as the working of certain political institutions." 3.

Popper thinks that this method is applicable in all the social sciences.

It is significant that economic analysis is paradigmatic for situational logic, for Popper says on several occasions that he considers economics to be the only social science free from historicism;<sup>4</sup> and he uses situational logic in several connections to refute doctrines that he attributes to historicism. The social sciences are thus to be freed from their historicist yoke by a general application of the method of that social science, economics, which does not suffer from historicism.

1. OS, II, 97. 2. Cf. OS, I, 315, note 63 to chapter 10.

3. OS, II, 97. W.B. Gallie (Philosophy and the Historical Understanding, p.119) comments on Popper's derivation of situational logic from "the method of economic analysis" that

"Popper cites certain parts of economics as illustrations of this method: but it seems to me that historians have always employed something like it, although, of course, in a rough and qualitative way."

It seems to me, both that Popper has acknowledged Gallie's point (cf. the passage PH, 149 cited in this note), and that his theory of historical explanation as expounded in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, whatever its defects, allows Popper to combine the view that situational logic derives from the methods of economics with the view that

"the best historians have often made use, more or less unconsciously, of this conception." PH, 149.

4. E.g. PH, 2, PH, 56; cf. OS, II, 29.

One illustration of the use of situational logic which Popper mentions in The Open Society is from Marx, and this choice of example may seem paradoxical in the light of Popper's presentation of Marx as one of the chief progenitors of historicism. Marx, in Popper's view, combines doctrines of the "purest historicism"<sup>1</sup> with methodological ideas, such as that of unintended consequences, which Popper shares. The point which Popper praises in Marx's use of "'the logic of the class situation'"<sup>2</sup> is a major theme in his discussion of situational logic in The Open Society and in his two later publications on this subject. The point which Popper praises in Marx's use of "'the logic of the class situation'"<sup>2</sup> is a major theme in his discussion of situational logic in The Open Society and in his two later publications on this subject. It is that situational logic is an objective method of social analysis. Popper approves of Marx's use of

"class interest as an institutional or objective social situation"<sup>3</sup> because

"wherever [Marx] makes serious use of anything like class interest, he always means a thing within the realm of autonomous sociology, and not a psychological category. He means a thing, a situation, and not a state of mind, a thought, or a feeling of being interested in a thing. It is simply that thing or that social institution or situation which is advantageous to a class." 4.

The economic determinism of "economic historicism"<sup>5</sup> that Marx connects with his use of class interest is, in Popper's opinion, one of the "exaggerations"<sup>6</sup> in Marx's use of situational logic. Popper must hold, to be consistent with his libertarian views, that the technique of situational logic does not imply determinism. It is nonetheless interesting that the two examples he

1. Popper, OS, II, 84, speaks of the Marxist method as the "purest historicism"; if he means by this the method of Marxism, then this is not quite the same as Marx's method; however on several occasions he characterizes some of Marx's doctrines as historicist, e.g. OS, II, 133-6; PH, 8, he describes Marx as "a famous historicist".

2. OS, II, 117.

3. OS, II, 112.

4. OS, II, 111-112.

5. OS, II, 133

6. OS, II, 117.



gives, in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society of users of situational logic, Tolstoy and Marx, both subscribed to historical determinism; and that they used what Popper recognizes as situational logic to present deterministic historical and social analyses.

The point which Popper praises in Marx's use of situational logic, that class interest is "not a psychological category" but an "objective social situation",<sup>1</sup> is one to which he had alluded in The Poverty of Historicism, where he wrote that

"In passing I should like to mention that neither the principle of methodological individualism, not that of the zero method of constructing rational models, implies in my opinion the adoption of a psychological method. On the contrary, I believe that these principles can be combined with the view that the social sciences are comparatively independent of psychological assumptions, and that psychology can be treated, not as the basis of all social sciences, but as one social science among others". 2.

In chapter 14 of The Open Society, to which he refers in a footnote to the passage cited above, Popper takes this argument much further: not only is it the case that situational logic is "independent of psychological assumptions" as he maintained in The Poverty of Historicism, but also the explanatory force of situational logic helps to demonstrate that "at least a very important part" of sociology must be "autonomous" in the sense that

"it is impossible...to reduce a sociology to a psychological or behaviouristic analysis of our actions." 3.

It has been noted above<sup>4</sup> that Popper characterizes psychologism as a reductionist view,

"that sociology must in principle be reducible to social psychology",<sup>5</sup> but he also associated this term with explanations in psychological terms which are not reductionist. In his most recent discussion of situational

1. OS, II, 112.

2. PH, 142; cf. PH, 158

"The 'zero method' of constructing rational models is not a psychological but rather a logical method."

3. OS, II, 90.

4. Cf. pp. 466

5. OS, II, 88, cf. OS, II, 89, 90 for similar characterizations.

logic, Popper argues that sociology is autonomous in two senses, which he seems to distinguish but which turn out to be related: first that sociology is "very extensively independent of psychology", and that the converse does not hold true because psychology "presupposes social concepts"; secondly, Popper says that sociology is also autonomous in the sense that it can make use of a method of "objective understanding", which is situational logic.<sup>1</sup> In connection with this second sense in which sociology is autonomous, Popper argues that all apparently psychological elements in an explanation such as motives are to be "converted" into situational terms, which are "objectively appropriate" to the agent's situation; and also that what Popper describes as "psychological-characterological hypotheses" cannot meet obligatory standards of being "open to rational and empirical criticism and improvement".<sup>2</sup>

In The Open Society there is a suggestion of a similar criticism in Popper's dismissal of the "'psychological' part" of an explanation of human actions as "very often trivial...as compared with" the situational component.<sup>3</sup> But Popper follows this passage with a warning that his "arguments against psychologism should not be misunderstood" as a complete dismissal of psychology, but rather, as directed against the reductionist programme of psychologism:<sup>4</sup> a programme which Popper thinks must issue in historicism, for the explanation of "all regularities in social life" in terms of psychological factors alone requires that origins be found for the features of social life in

"human nature and...human psychology as they existed prior to our society" 5.

That psychologism "fails to understand the main task of the social sciences" "of analysing the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions" is, in Popper's opinion, "the most important criticism of psychologism".<sup>6</sup> Popper uses the argument that a complete reduction of human

1. LSW, theses XXII and XXIII, pp. 245-6; thesis XXV, pp. 246-7.

2. LSW, thesis XXV; Popper's argument is discussed below, pp. 142-43.

3. OS, II, 97

4. OS, II, 97.

5. OS, II, 92-93; cf. OS, II, 98.

6. OS, II, 94-95.



actions to psychological terms is impossible, in conjunction with two other arguments against psychologism in his discussion of situational logic.

"Continuing this argument against psychologism we may say that our actions are to a very large extent explicable in terms of the situation in which they occur. Of course, they are never fully explicable in terms of the situation alone; an explanation of the way in which a man, when crossing the street, dodges the cars which move on it may go beyond the situation, and may refer to his motives, to an 'instinct' of self-preservation, or to his wish to avoid pain, etc. But this 'psychological' part of the explanation is very often trivial, as compared with the detailed determination of his action by what we may call the logic of the situation; and besides, it is impossible to include all psychological factors in the description of the situation." 1.

The argument that the "'psychological' part" of the explanation is trivial by comparison with the situational component has been considered above in connection with Popper's treatment of trivial, and also in connection with Popper's treatment of psychologism in connection with an attempt to minimize or even eliminate the "'psychological' part" in explanation of human actions. The importance of such a part in historical explanations of such actions as Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon will become clearer in considering an example of a historian's use of situational analysis.<sup>2</sup> The last argument in this passage, that "no description of the situation" can "include all psychological factors" clearly applies to the non-psychological factors of the situation as well, and consequently gives no grounds for preferring the latter to the former in an explanation.

Popper is, I think, correct in arguing that the reductionist programme of psychologism is untenable, but his further arguments for minimizing or eliminating the "'psychological' part" of the explanation, in favour of situational analysis, do not carry much weight. Nonetheless, it is this second point which will turn out to be the chief issue in Popper's later discussion of situational logic in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften." For situational logic to be a method of "objective understanding" requires, according to Popper, that ostensibly psychological "springs of action" in

1. OS, II, 97.

2. OS, II, 265; cf. section VI below.



an explanation be replaced by "situational springs of action", for these latter are in principle testable whereas the former are not "open to criticism", criticism being possible where testing is not, even in principle. Popper's reason for this stipulation is, as has been suggested above and as will become clearer in the sequel, that he wants to leave no openings for empathic understanding.

One last point which Popper makes is to guard against what might seem to be an opening for psychologism:

"The method of applying a situational logic to the social sciences is not based on any psychological assumption concerning the rationality (or otherwise) of 'human nature'. On the contrary: when we speak of 'rational behaviour' or of 'irrational behaviour' then we mean behaviour which is, or which is not, in accordance with the logic of that situation. In fact, the psychological analysis of an action in terms of its (rational or irrational) motives presupposes - as has been pointed out by Max Weber - that we have previously developed some standard of what is to be considered as rational in the situation in question." 1.

What Popper says in the last phrase deserves some attention: what are the criteria for determining "what is to be considered as rational" in a given situation? The answer to this question is clearly relevant to the question whether situational logic is objective, as Popper claims in his most recent discussion: if it is not always possible to reach inter-subjective agreement on what constitutes a rational action in some situations, as I shall argue, then in some cases not everything about situational logic is objective in the primary sense in which Popper uses the term.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, if standards of rationality refer to the norms and institutional patterns of a particular society or culture, then the hypothetico-deductive form of explanation may not be the appropriate model for situational logic. I shall argue for both these points in more detail in the next section.

1. OS, II, 97

2. Cf. above pp. ~~42~~ 106-107

### III. The Assumption of Rationality

It is worth noting that Popper, in his later discussions of situational logic, puts stress on features of situational logic other than the assumption of rationality, on which explanations in terms of situational logic rely, according to what Popper says in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society. If Popper does refer, in his later writings, to the assumption of rationality which was central to his discussions of situational logic in The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, then he does so obliquely, as in saying that actions are explained, in terms of situational logic, when they are shown to be objectively appropriate to the situation in which they occurred; this notion is reminiscent of Popper's characterization of a rational action in The Open Society just cited. However, Popper unpacks the notion of an action which is "objectively appropriate" to the situation in somewhat different terms from that of the action being rational.

Consequently it is appropriate to examine the assumption of rationality at this point. That the assumption of rationality on which situational logic proceeds, according to Popper's earlier writings, is not "trivial" as Popper suggests, has been demonstrated by work in decision theory subsequent to Popper's first publications on situational logic. J.W.N. Watkins argues that the discovery

"that there may be decision problems whose solutions cannot be calculated" 1.

reinforces Popper's critique of determinism; it provides a further argument, less forceful than Popper's argument from the growth of knowledge<sup>2</sup>, for

1. J.W.N. Watkins, "Decision and Belief," Decision Making BBC Publications, 1967, p. 13. Hereafter cited as Watkins, "Decision".

2. In the preface to PH, v-vi.

"the conclusion that the future history of mankind is essentially unpredictable" 1.

Although what Watkins describes as the "big hole" in decision theory,<sup>2</sup> the insolubility of certain decision problems, can be argued to be in line with one of Popper's fundamental doctrines with regard to the philosophy of history, his libertarianism, nonetheless, the light cast by decision theory on

"the paradoxes which reside in the very notion of a rational decision"<sup>3</sup> shows that Popper's characterization of the general law presupposed by situational logic as "trivial" is untenable.

"Recent work in decision theory has shown that there is no simple coherent set of principles capable of precise statement which correspond to naive ideas of rationality. Just as research in this century in the foundations of mathematics has shown that we do not yet know exactly what mathematics is, so the work in decision theory shows that we do not yet understand what we mean by rationality. Even in highly restricted circumstances it turns out to be extremely difficult to characterize in a nonparadoxical fashion a rational choice among alternative courses of action." 4.

John Milnor, in "Games Against Nature",

"proposes nine criteria that any acceptable principle of decision should satisfy. He goes on to show that none of the standard decision principles proposed satisfy all nine. More generally, his results, like those of Russell's paradox for the foundations of set theory, yield an impossibility theorem and show that the naive theory of rationality, like the naive theory of sets, cannot easily be systematically reconstructed." 5.

1. Watkins, "Decision", p.16. Watkins argument is that

"...the future history of mankind is essentially unpredictable... [because] human decisions collectively shape historical events... [and] it is sometimes impossible for a decision-maker to calculate an optimum solution for his decision-problem...where this is the case, it will normally be impossible for a would-be predictor to predict the decision - there may be occasional exceptions to this, but the exceptions cannot become the rule. Hence at least some of the factors which will shape future events are unpredictable; hence the future history of mankind is unpredictable..." p.16.

2. Watkins, "Decision," p.16.

3. Anatol Rapoport, "International Relations and Game Theory," Decision Making, BBC Publications, 1967, p.91, Hereafter cited as Rapoport, "Game Theory".

4. Patrick Suppes, "Decision Theory" Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), II, 310

5. P. Suppes, op.cit. II, 312; Milnor's article can be found in two anthologies: Decision Processes, ed. Robert M Thrall, Clyde H. Coombs and Robert L. Davis (N.Y.1954), pp.39-59; and Game Theory and Related Approaches to Social Behaviour, ed. Martin Shubik (N.Y., 1964), pp. 120-131.



The arguments by which this result is reached are highly technical. However, an example given by Anatol Rapoport brings out some of the difficulties which have been uncovered in the notion of a rational decision, and which bear on the kinds of problems which may arise in this line for historical explanation:

"The paradoxes which reside in the very notion of a 'rational decision' ...are not apparent in situations where there is only one decision-maker, for in those instances a rational decision in the sense of maximizing one's utility (or expected utility) is at least conceivable, given sufficient knowledge about the facts of the case. Likewise, in situations where there are exactly two decision-makers, whose interests are diametrically opposed, a rational decision can still be defined as that which extracts the most benefit at the expense of the opponent. However, once these situations are transcended, for example, in cases where the interests of the decision-makers are partly opposed and partly coincident, and also in situations where more than two decision-makers are involved, the very concept of rational decision becomes riddled with contradictions." 1.

Either or both of these features may occur in historical situations; and the difficulties which they raise for the assumption of rationality which situational logic seems to presuppose cannot, I think, be swept under the carpet of the "uncertainty of the human factor" or the ubiquity of "unintended consequences" in social life: because they impinge upon the soundness of explaining actions in terms of models constructed on the assumption of rationality on the part of the actors.

"A simple situation of the first kind is seen in the Balance of Terrors between two nuclear powers. Suppose it is in the interest of both powers to dismantle their nuclear establishments. A decision to do so cannot be rationalized on the grounds of self-interest. For should the opponent disarm, it is more advantageous to remain armed (because of the intimidating power of nuclear monopoly). Should the opponent remain armed, one must remain armed in order to avoid being intimidated. Thus it is in the interest of each power to remain armed regardless of the state of the other. This conclusion contradicts our original assumption that it is to the advantage of both powers to disarm. The contradiction arises from the circumstance that the interests of the two 'players' are in this case only partially, not diametrically, opposed." 2.

This example can be transposed into a problem for historical explanation.

1. Rapoport, "Game Theory," p.91.      2. Rapoport, "Game Theory," pp.91-92.

Suppose that the second power had chosen not to disarm. This course of action is not rational <sup>by</sup> hypothesis; it goes to make up the situation in which the first power acted. As for the state of information of the first power, which is also part of its situation in Popper's view: suppose that the first power did not, at the time of action, have knowledge of the second power's decision, but that it did have professed experts at predicting what the second power would do. Different experts might of course disagree in their predictions of what the second power would do, leaving the government of the first power without a single authoritative prediction. These points then describe the salient features of the situation in which the first power acted. If it chose to disarm, as historians with hindsight we can say that this action was not rational, as the second power remained armed and the first power had thus put itself at a disadvantage; and the historian can point to those experts who argued that the second power would remain armed. This example assumes that the decision of the first power to disarm was in some sense irrevocable; if the second power were to implement its decision to remain armed in secrecy, or by refusing inspections, so that the first power was left somewhat in the dark concerning the armaments of the second power, then a decision to disarm on the part of the first power would be irrevocable. If the government of the first power had chosen to act on the advice of those experts who predicted that the second power would not disarm, and the first power had not disarmed, then, by hypothesis, its action was not rational. Whatever action the first power had chosen to take in the situation as described, it could not be described as rational. The "big hole" or, perhaps the swamp, in decision theory then tells against Popper's early characterization of situational logic in terms of a "trivial" assumption of rationality.

As for Popper's second characterization of rational behaviour as in accordance with the logic of the situation in which it occurs, it can I think be argued that there are examples of behaviour which satisfy this criterion but whose explanation does not involve general laws. In the example which I shall consider, of the potlatch ceremony among the Kwakiutl Indians on the Northwest coast of America,<sup>1</sup> it is difficult to see how the

1. Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (London, 1935)

behaviour described, which conforms to the logic of the social situation, is rational<sup>1</sup> in anything like the usual sense of the term.

The Kwakiutl Indians live in an area of considerable natural resources and have far more material possessions than do many other "primitive" peoples. The status of a man in the Kwakiutl culture depends on how he gives away or destroys his possessions. No man can receive a gift without returning to its donor twice what he was given; should he fail to do so, he would lose face. Thus a chief could shame a rival by giving him more than he could return with the appropriate interest. A chief could also try to shame a rival, not by giving him anything but by destroying more possessions than the rival could afford to, in the ceremony called the potlatch.<sup>2</sup> Prime commodities for destruction in a potlatch were candle-fish oil or copper, the latter being extremely valuable.<sup>3</sup> Once a chief had given a potlatch, his rival had to seek to outdo him. There were, however, cultural checks on this practice in that a chief could not overdo his destruction of property "to the utter impoverishment" of his people.<sup>4</sup>

To put on a potlatch, then, can be said to be in accordance with the logic of the social situation under certain circumstances. Yet it is difficult to see how it could be described as rational behaviour. This point is connected with the form which the explanation of such behaviour takes. Behaviour can be said to be rational if it would be done by any sane person in the relevant circumstances, and this is not quite equivalent to explaining behaviour as what would be done by any person who accepts the norms of a society in which the relevant circumstances occur.<sup>5</sup>

1. Benedict, op. cit., p.139

2. Benedict, op. cit., p. 139-140.

3. Benedict, op. cit. pp. 140-1.

4.

5. Peter Winch has argued ("Understanding a Primitive Society," American Philosophical Quarterly, v.I, pp. 307-324, 1964) that there can be no neutral assessment of such practices as witchcraft as rational or irrational. Such practices as witchcraft or a potlatch must be understood as part of a way of life.



To be sure, an analogy might be drawn between the potlatch ceremony and what Thorstein Veblen described as conspicuous consumption in American society<sup>1</sup>, but if it is assumed that a general law could be found from which these two patterns of social behaviour could be derived then it would, I think, have to be a psychological generalization about human nature: about human preferences for conspicuous display of their worldly goods rather than consumption for use, if their basic needs are satisfied. Popper, as has been seen, does not think much of the explanatory force of such psychological generalizations in comparison,

"with the detailed determination of...action by...the logic of the situation..." 2.

In his later writings Popper is even more severe on the use of psychology in explaining action.<sup>3</sup> Thus it seems that Popper might not be happy that this use of situational logic presupposes a psychological generalization, if it is assumed that it can be filled out in accordance with the hypothetico-deductive model. Nor does the suggested psychological generalization approximate the allegedly "trivial general law" that "sane" men "act more or less rationally." 4.

Moreover, I think that the attempt to derive both the American pattern of conspicuous consumption described by Veblen and the potlatch ceremony of the Kwakiutl Indians from such a general law must be nugatory. The two patterns of behaviour are connected by an analogy resting on our experience of human nature, and not by a common derivation from a general law. Nor does the assumption that there is such a general law rather than an analogy add anything to the proposed explanation of the potlatch ceremony in terms of the pattern of culture of the Kwakiutl Indians.

1. Benedict suggests such an analogy, p.136:

"The manipulation of wealth on the North-West Coast is clearly enough in many ways a parody on our own economic arrangements."

2. OS, II, 97.

3. Cf. section V below on situational logic in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften". D.S. Chattopadhyaya, in a thesis written under Popper's direction (Individuals and Societies: a methodological inquiry Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1967) has said (p.53) that Popper, in defending individualism "did not accord due recognition to psychology in the study of society."

4. OS, II, 265.

If we consider one of Popper's later characterizations of situational logic, the criterion he gives for the objectivity of a situational analysis can be satisfied in the case at hand without calling on unrestricted generalizations or Popper's "trivial general law" about rationality in particular. Popper states this criterion in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" in the following way: "to be sure I have other aims and other theories" than the agent whose action I am trying to explain but my analysis provides "objective understanding" of his action if

"had I been in his situation, analyzed thus and so - wherein the situation includes aims and state of knowledge - then I would have, and so would you have also, acted in such a way." 1.

In the interview on historical explanation Popper makes the same point:

"suppose that I do in fact feel that I understand what Caesar did, and why he did it...I must now formulate my theory, test it, and then say to someone else, 'You try to become Caesar. Do you think that you could become a different Caesar?' And I must try to find whether his Caesar is not as good as, or better than, mine." 2.

That is, Popper holds that a situational analysis is objective if intersubjective agreements can be reached on the acceptability of the explanation.

In a situational explanation of the potlatch ceremony of the Kwakiutl Indians, what is involved is a recognition of the relevant social norms.<sup>3</sup> Popper's criterion can be applied: if I were in a social situation where these norms applied, and if you were also, then you would act as these norms prescribe on the pain of shame. But in this instance, as in many others to

1. LSW, p. 247.

2. HE, p.22.

3. Chattopadhyaya, *op.cit.* p. 104-107, says in effect that situational logic explains actions in terms of social norms, in arguing that "situational logic is not logic by courtesy".

act in accordance with social norms may not be rational behaviour.<sup>1.</sup>

Thus the use of situational logic in historical explanations may not involve either universally valid generalizations or constructing models on the assumption of the rationality of the actors, an assumption which has been seen to be deeply problematical, and not "trivial".

#### IV. Situational Logic in the Interview on Historical Explanation; Popper and Collingwood.

Popper, in the interview on historical explanation, characterizes situational logic as objective in the sense that "everything about it is, in principle objectively testable":

"As a rule, the historian tries to reconstruct the situation in such a way, that the aims or plans of action of the various people involved form part of the situation as well as their knowledge, and especially the difficulties or problems with which they were confronted. He tries to present this situation in such a way that the historical explicandum - the event which the historian wishes to explain - follows from the description of the situation if we assume that everybody involved acted in accordance with those plans, or intentions, or interests, and with that knowledge which formed part of the situation."

"I have called a historical explanation which proceeds in this way one which uses the method of 'situational logic'". 2.

1. Cf. Benedict, op. cit., p. 160

"The segment of human behaviour which the [Kwakiutl have] marked out to institutionalize in its culture is one which is sufficiently close to the attitudes of our own culture to be intelligible and we have a definite vocabulary with which to discuss it. The megalomaniac paranoid trend is a definite danger in our society. It faces us with a choice of possible attitudes. One is to brand it as abnormal and reprehensible, and it is the attitude we have chosen in our civilization. The other extreme is to make it the essential attribute of ideal man, and this is the solution in the culture of the North-West Coast."

2. HE, p. 21.



Popper maintains that if the historian adopts this procedure, then

"we can in principle test whether this was, or was not, the situation in which the various people found themselves." 1.

For Popper to hold that statements about historical situations are "in principle, objectively testable" is incompatible with his earlier argument, in The Open Society, that historical interpretations are generally untestable due to the limitations of historical evidence.<sup>2</sup>

Popper says that "the objective reconstruction of the situation" can be tested because

"if we find new evidence, then it should be possible for our reconstruction to be refuted." 3.

It was on the grounds that new evidence was rarely forthcoming<sup>4</sup> that Popper argued, in The Open Society, that most historical interpretations must be circular. I have argued, in chapter ~~four~~<sup>five</sup> below, that historical interpretations of limited evidence need not be circular because they can be criticized, if not tested, without further evidence.

Reconstructions of situations are in principle testable because they consist of hypotheses from which statements may be deduced which can be tested by comparison with the available evidence:

"Very important in history are those reconstructions from which we deduce the existence of new evidence, on the grounds, say, that no man would have acted in such a way without also, say, writing such and such a letter." 5.

1. HE, p.21.

2. Cf. OS, chapter 25, discussed in chapter ~~four~~<sup>five</sup> below

3. HE, p.22.

4. Cf. OS, II, 265:

"...the so-called 'sources' of history only record such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that the sources will, as a rule, contain only facts that fit in with a pre-conceived theory. And since no further facts are available, it will not, as a rule, be possible to test that or any other subsequent theory." (underlining mine).

5. HE, p.21. It is interesting to note in view of Popper's arguments against psychology and the use of psychology in explanations (discussed pp. ~~14-20-38-41~~<sup>120-122, 146-3</sup>) that this particular deduction seems to rely on a psychological generalization.

Of course such an argument may hang in the air because the appropriate evidence may just not be there. For this reason Popper might be better to say that there is always the possibility of testing the reconstruction of a situation by discovering new evidence; but this is not the same thing as saying that such reconstructions are testable in principle. Such reconstructions can also be criticized in terms of the use made of the available evidence, if no further evidence is forthcoming; such criticism involves general knowledge of human nature applied to the problem of what actions would be appropriate in a given situation. It is by this kind of argument that a historian's reconstruction of a situation is criticized, and appraised for its objectivity in the sense of inter-subjective acceptability - the possibility of discovering new evidence as a way of testing historical work takes second place to these procedures which are more commonly used by historians than Popper recognizes.<sup>1</sup>

Popper's defence of situational logic as objective, in this interview, indicates that Popper now thinks that the historian's work is more like that of the scientist than he thought when he first wrote The Open Society and The Poverty of Historicism.

"By proposing solutions and counter-solutions, and critically discussing them, both historian and scientist test explanations, in order to find out which are the best explanations. It is the competition between the various possible explanations which produces the best results - in complete analogy with science." 2.

Popper, in his earlier discussions of historical explanation, did not say that historians had ways of testing proposed explanations; and it was argued above that Popper's understanding of the idiographic character of historiography debarred the historian from investigating one aspect of the soundness of historical explanations.<sup>3</sup>

Popper now seems to think that historians do not commonly recognize the similarity between their work and that of scientists; for Popper argues

1. Cf. chapter <sup>five</sup> ~~four~~ below.

2. HE, p.22.

3. In contrast with the liability to thoroughgoing testing which for Popper constitutes the objectivity of scientific theories.

that if the procedures of situational logic are adopted, an important distinction is possible which is often neglected by historians:

"historians often make the attempt to understand the situation intuitively. They fail to distinguish between this intuitive attempt and the fact that they have on the basis of this intuitive attempt, to put forward a theory - an objective analysis which could be tested." 1.

Collingwood's mistake, his "subjectivism",<sup>2</sup> according to Popper, reflects this common confusion on the part of historians.

"According to Collingwood, I must become Caesar, and if I really put myself in Caesar's skin then I'll know for certain what Caesar did and why, and I'll understand his situation. I think this is a very dangerous teaching because it is subjective and dogmatic." 3.

"...Collingwood thought that what I consider to be the first or second preparatory step was the last step. Suppose I do in fact feel that I understand what Caesar did, and why he did it. Collingwood believed that this would make my theory true. But he is wrong in this belief. I must now formulate my theory, test it, and then say to someone else, 'You try to become Caesar. Do you think that you could become a different Caesar?' And I must try to find whether his Caesar is not as good as, or better than mine. This doesn't imply relativism, of course, it means that the competing theories must be weighed against each other. It is not enough to try to understand Caesar intuitively. That is only the beginning. Only after that do we really start." 4.

Popper represents Collingwood in the light of what Alan Donagan has called the "received interpretation";

"that Collingwood held that historians 'grasp past thoughts', 'ascertain historical data', or 'verify historical theses' by a non-inferential intuitive penetration through the evidence to the thought 'inside' the actions that produced it." 5.

In arguing that this interpretation misrepresents Collingwood, Donagan has pointed out that Collingwood, in spite of "ambiguous evidence" and "asides" in his posthumously published Idea of History, held

"a thoroughly inferential and non-intuitive theory of historical verification. 6.

1. HE, p. 22.      2. HE, p. 21.      3. HE, p. 21.      4. HE, p. 22.  
 5. Alan Donagan, "The Verification of Historical Theses," Philosophical Quarterly VI (1956), p.193 and p.195.  
 6. Donagan, op. cit., p.196; Donagan discusses the "ambiguous evidence and "asides" mentioned above, p. 201 ff.



"Few commentators have recognised either that Collingwood acknowledged that imaginative reconstruction of past thoughts are corrigible and, in a sense, hypothetical; or that he rejected the view that an historian who succeeds in re-thinking a past thought must intuitively know that he has done so." 1.

Donagan thinks that Collingwood's essays on "The Historical Imagination" and on "Historical Evidence" present the heart of this inferential theory of historical verification:

"History has this in common with every other science: that the historian is not allowed to claim any single piece of knowledge, except where he can justify his claim by exhibiting it to himself in the first place, and secondly to any one else who is both able and willing to follow his demonstration, the grounds upon which it is based. This is what is meant, above, by describing history as inferential. The knowledge in virtue of which a man is a historian is a knowledge of what evidence at his disposal proves about certain events." 2.

If this openness to criticism<sup>3</sup> is an indispensable component of historical thinking, in Collingwood's view - and I think Donagan is correct to argue that it is - then there seems to be little or no difference between Popper and Collingwood on this point: that the account which the historian constructs of past events must be open to criticism.

There is a point of importance which Popper's dismissal of Collingwood as mistakenly "subjective and dogmatic" misrepresents: this point can be brought out by considering an example which Popper also uses, of Julius Caesar, which will be considered in more detail below. Donagan argues that Collingwood's view was

"that to re-think the thoughts which led Caesar to cross the Rubicon would imply reconstructing Caesar's situation, not that to reconstruct that situation would be a means of re-thinking those thoughts. He repudiated the idea that actions or their situations can be reconstructed without considering

1. Donagan, op. cit., p. 200

2. R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (Oxford, 1946) p. 252; hereafter cited as Collingwood, IH; this passage is cited and discussed by Donagan, op. cit., p.195-6.

3. In the passage following the above citation (Collingwood, IH, p.252) Collingwood contrasts the attitude described above, which he attributes to a critic, with that of a sceptic, who is unwilling to follow such a demonstration.

their inner side: Caesar's situation cannot be ascertained independently of what he and others thought about it." 1.

Although defenders of Popper sometimes suggest that the sound part of Collingwood's ideas is covered by Popper's theory of situational logic, it can be argued that, to the contrary, Collingwood clarified a point which is obscurely presented in one characterization Popper has given of situational logic.

"It is most important to see that all the people in a situation, are acting in a problem-situation: historical situations are problem-situations. Thus we must distinguish between the historian's problem which is to explain certain historical events and the problems of the people who are the actors on the historical stage. Understanding their problems is really understanding the historical situation. A man is a good historian to the extent to which he shows why these were the problems of the people who acted." 2.

As an example of how the historian handles his problem, Popper instances "the history of science" as

"a particularly good field for studying historical explanations. Because here the actor - the scientist - was confronted with particular scientific questions, we know very clearly what his problems were. To describe his situation one describes the scientific theories of the time - and why they did not satisfy this particular scientist. Here we have a very simple example of situational analysis, or situation logic." 3.

Popper's characterization of the historian's subject matter is almost indistinguishable from one given by Collingwood. Collingwood gives two descriptions of the reflective acts which he considers to be the subject

1. The passage cited is from Donagan, op. cit. p.206; the argument is pp.205-206. A relevant passage which Donagan argues (p.205-6) "illustrates" Collingwood's view of "what historians try to achieve, not how they achieve it" is

"So the historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it." Collingwood, IH, p.215.

2. HE, p. 22.

3. HE, p. 22.



matter of history; these two descriptions bring out, respectively the practical and the contemplative forms which reflective acts may take. First, Collingwood says that the historian studies purposive acts such as a politician's implementation, and perhaps modification, of his policy, or the intentions of a military commander as revealed by the record of his acts;<sup>1</sup> secondly, with respect to intellectual activity, Collingwood says that the historian must identify the thinker's problem and reconstruct its solution.<sup>2</sup> Collingwood's characteristic example of reflective acts as problem-solving are from philosophy, eg. Plato; and Popper's example of a problem-situation is, characteristically, from science. One important point which Collingwood makes in this connection is his observation that, in practice, the most difficult part of historical work is to identify the thinker's problem, but that to do so is prerequisite to the historian's being able to "judge the success" of his reconstruction of its solution: to reconstruct a "problem-situation" from the available evidence can be a considerable task, even in the "simple" case of scientific work.<sup>3</sup>

Comparing the passages cited above, there seems to be little difference between Popper and Collingwood's respective views of the historian's task. Popper's characterization of situational logic as investigating the problem-situations of historical agents fits in with some of his other remarks on situational logic: the description of the situation, as Popper notes in both this interview and in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften,"<sup>4</sup> includes the information which the historical agents had at their disposal. If the information is taken to constitute a problem, then the agent's finding a testable solution to this problem can be understood as objectively appropriate to his situation: it is something like this that Popper means by

1. Collingwood, IH, p.309-310.

2. Collingwood, IH, p. 312-314.

3. Popper, judging from his presentation of this point, does not recognize the difficulty of this enterprise; Popper consistently underestimates the intellectual difficulties of historical work. (Cf. chapter ~~four~~ <sup>five</sup> below)

4. Also parenthetically in his discussion of the "zero method" in PH, above p.112



saying that scientific theories are objective. If a philosopher suggests an approach to a problem which is open to criticism, then such a suggestion would meet Popper's standards for philosophic discourse,<sup>1</sup> and it would also be in what is perhaps a looser sense, objectively appropriate to the philosopher's situation.

But if these kinds of examples are what Popper understands by situational logic, then there seems to be no difference between his and Collingwood's view of the historian's activity, and Popper's criticisms of Collingwood's "teaching" as "subjective" and "dogmatic" is wrong: for ferreting out the problem of a historical agent and the way in which he solved it can meet Popper's standards for explaining actions as objectively appropriate to the given situation. Moreover, Popper's description of Collingwood's views as dealing only with "the first or second preparatory step" is, I think, misleading. For the historian to present an agent's problem and solution to that problem, he must reconstruct that problem: the historian must, for example, follow the reasoning employed in a scientific theory in order to see whether it provides a testable solution to the problem at hand. If he is successful in doing this, he can give an account of the historical situation which is objective in a sense acceptable to Popper. If historical situations are problem-situations, then Popper is also misleading on a related point: in saying that historians often do no more than "make an attempt to understand the situation intuitively" for if the historian can identify the situation as a problem situation, he has gone beyond merely understanding the situation "intuitively".

The agreement between Popper and Collingwood, that historians proceed by identifying problems and reconstructing their solutions on the basis of historical evidence covers only one kind of historical explanation. A historian may also wish to explain, as Popper says,

"why these were the problems of the people who acted";  
he may wish to explain why the "common problem situation" of a period was just that. Collingwood's theory of historical explanation does not seem to allow for this kind of explanation, which might refer to social factors or

1. Cf. the discussion of objectivity, as Popper understands it, above, pp. 106-7

social structures, rather than to "reflective acts" which can only be the acts of individuals. Popper's emphasis on situations which are social, as well as on problems, would seem, if it is considered apart from Popper's other methodological stipulations, to allow for this kind of inquiry: for one may investigate why a particular problem situation was characteristic of a period - "why these were the problems of the people who acted" - as well as the attempts made to solve or to handle the characteristic problems. But the doctrine of methodological individualism, in the rigorous form in which Popper defends it, requires that references to social collectives or social structures in describing a situation, be understood as referring to theoretical constructions which designate the actions of countless individuals and the unintended consequences of these actions. Whether this stipulation is a necessary or a fruitful addition to the analysis of social situations will be considered below, in chapter ~~five~~<sup>Six</sup>. Here it can be said in brief that Popper's situational logic, on its own, provides openings for kinds of historical explanations other than the re-working of problems of individuals discussed above, but that Popper's doctrine of methodological individualism may hinder such approaches.

## VI Situational Logic in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften"

Some of the ideas and arguments about situational logic which Popper presents in his lecture, "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" have already been mentioned in discussing Popper's earlier statements on situational logic: such as his argument against psychologism as reductionism on the grounds that psychology "presupposes social concepts" and more specifically that the psychology of learning and psychoanalysis require such "obviously social categories" as "(a) imitation (b) speech (c) family" whereas a central concept in sociology, that of unintended consequences, is "psychologically inexplicable"<sup>1</sup>, and also his puzzling doctrine that situational logic as

1. ISW, Theses XXII and XXIII, p. 245-6.

a method of "objective understanding" requires that "psychological springs of actions" be eliminated from explanations "on principle" and replaced "with situational elements".<sup>1</sup>

In this lecture Popper reaffirms his view that there is no fundamental difference between the methods of the natural and the social sciences. The structure of this talk is characteristic of Popper's thought. He begins with general epistemological theses which he subsequently applies to the social sciences. A theory of knowledge must do justice to the different important aspects of our knowledge: our knowledge of the world is amazing, and "our ignorance is limitless and sobering."<sup>2</sup> "Science or knowledge" starts not from "observation or collection of data but from problems."<sup>3</sup>

Popper's "chief thesis" concerns the method of the social sciences, which is that of the natural sciences: "a critical continuation of the method of trial and error" by "thoroughly testing attempts to solve their problems". It is prerequisite to such testing that the attempted solutions be "accessible to factual criticism", that is to falsification. Those attempted solutions which "withstand criticism" are accepted "provisionally". It is the "objectivity of the critical method" which constitutes the "so-called objectivity of science:"

"the logical auxiliaries of criticism - the category of logical contradiction - are objective." 4.

Deductive logic<sup>5</sup> is "a theory of rational criticism" because it makes possible attempts

"to show that unacceptable consequences can be deduced from the assertion which is to be criticized". 6.

One of the reasons why we work with theories in the sciences is that they are deductive systems and thus

1. LSW, Thesis XXV, p.246-7. I have translated Momente, as in psychologische Momente or Situationsmomente (cf. thesis XXV cited in full below pp. 241-4) as "springs of action"; this seems to me to be the closest English equivalent I can think of for what Popper covers by his usage of Momente.
2. LSW, Summary of theses I-III, p. 233. 3. LSW, Thesis IV, p. 234.
4. All the citations in this paragraph are from thesis VI, LSW, p.235.
5. To which Popper devotes theses XV-XVIII, LSW.
6. LSW, Thesis XVIII, p.243.



"open to rational criticism through their consequences." 1.

Popper devotes the remainder of his lecture to

"further theses on the theory of knowledge peculiar to the social sciences," 2.

theses which are in part familiar as themes discussed in his earlier writings: e.g. that the reductionist doctrine of psychologism is untenable for the reasons mentioned above.

In connection with these theses Popper argues that sociology is autonomous in two senses which turn out, I think, to be closely related. The first sense in which sociology is autonomous is a reversal of the claims of psychologism as reductionism: "to explain society entirely psychologically" is impossible, because the psychological terms used will themselves presuppose social concepts, so that psychology is "dependent" on sociology and not the reverse; and also because unintended consequences can never be explained in purely psychological terms. Thus

"sociology is autonomous in the sense that it can and must be very extensively independent of psychology" 3.

Popper makes explicit the context in which he presents the "second sense" in which "sociology is autonomous": that there is "an entirely objective method" of understanding - Popper uses the term Verstehen here - derived from

"logical investigation of the methods of political economy... which is applicable to all the social sciences" 4.

That situational logic, which is the "method of objective understanding" mentioned, is based on the method of economic analysis, is a point which Popper has made before in The Open Society. 5.

The connection of the "second sense" in which sociology is autonomous with the first is through Popper's association of the reductionist doctrine

1. The other reason is that

"a theory or deductive system is an attempt at explanation and thus an attempt to solve a scientific problem".

Both citations are from LSW, thesis XIX, p.243; on the second reason, cf. Popper on explanation as the "aim of science", discussed in chapter two, pp. 74, 75.

2. Thesis XXI-XXVI, p. 245-7.

4. Thesis XXV, p.246

3. Thesis XXIII, p.245.

5. Cf. above pp. 117

of psychologism with the use of psychology as a partial but not necessarily a complete explanation. As in The Open Society Popper juxtaposes his criticisms of these two doctrines. He argues, in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", that

"A social science of objective understanding can be developed independently of all subjective or psychological ideas. It consists in an adequate analysis of the situation of the acting persons, so as to explain the action from the situation, without further psychological aids. The objective 'understanding' ['Verstehen'] is that we see that the action was objectively appropriate to the situation. In other words, the situation is extensively analysed so that what first appear to be psychological springs of action [Momente], for example, wishes, motives, memories and associations, are converted into situational springs of action (Situationismomente). A man with such and such wishes becomes, then, a man to whose situation it is appropriate that he objectively is equipped with such and such theories or information.

Thus it is possible for us to understand his actions in the objective sense, so that we can say: indeed I have other aims and other theories (than for example Charlemagne); but had I been in his situation, analyzed thus and so - wherein the situation includes aims and state of knowledge - then I would have, and so would you have also, acted in such a way. The method of situational analysis is therefore an individualistic method, but not a psychological one, because it excludes psychological springs of action on principle, and replaces them with objective situational elements. ...explanations by situational logic are rational, theoretical reconstructions...over-simplified, and over schematized and thus in general false. However...they can...be good approximations to the truth - and even better than other corrigible [überprüfbar] explanations.... Above all, situational analyses are open to rational and empirical criticism and improvement. We can, for example, find a letter which shows that the information which Charlemagne had at his disposal was entirely different from that which we had assumed in our analysis. In contrast to this, psychological-characterological hypotheses are hardly ever open to criticism" 1.

To describe such a method as this as one of understanding or Verstehen may seem a strange usage, in the light of the previous uses of this term. Popper's choice of terminology here can be compared with his earlier description of situational logic, in The Poverty of Historicism, as a method

1. LSW, Thesis XXV, pp.246-7. I have cited this thesis in full, because of its importance as Popper's most recent statement on situational logic; also it is not as well-known as Popper's remarks in PH and OS.

peculiar to the social sciences: it is a case of borrowing the language of his opponents to counter their case. Popper's aim, in characterizing situational logic as a method of "objective understanding" because it fulfils certain stipulations, is an attempt to show that empathic understanding has no part to play in the methods of the social sciences, and thus to put the established notion of Verstehen on its head. Although Popper argues for his prohibition of psychological factors on the "principle" that they are not "open to criticism" and thus lack the prerequisite for scientific statements, his prohibition actually derives, I think, from his attempt to exclude empathy from the method of understanding. I shall argue that this is indeed the case in examining his ostensible argument, in the next paragraph but one.

Although Popper introduces situational logic in this lecture as a method applicable in all the social sciences, the little he says to illustrate the use of situational logic indicates that he considers it to be a method for the historian as well; in the interview on historical explanation, he presented situational logic as "the main feature of historical explanation". In this lecture Popper refers to Charlemagne, a figure more studied by the historian than the social scientist, to illustrate how situational analysis provides objective understanding. The example he gives of improving a situational analysis is by finding new evidence on historical events: a hypothetical letter bearing on "the knowledge which Charlemagne had at his disposal". This example is similar to that which he gave in the interview on historical explanation to show that situational logic is "in principle, objectively testable".

The principle on which Popper says he excludes psychological factors from situational analysis seems to be that such analyses can be said to be objective only if they are couched in terms that "are open to rational and empirical criticism and improvement". Situational logic provides "objective understanding" because it is open to criticism and improvement and can thus satisfy these canons of the "objectivity of the critical method" which Popper discussed earlier in this lecture; Popper seems to think that, by contrast,



what he calls "psychological-characterological hypotheses" cannot meet this standard. Although some statements by psychologists may be vaporous, psychological statements are not intrinsically impervious to criticism; little is required in the way of argument to show that Popper's contention is untenable. Popper's position might be interpreted as representing an animus against psychology,<sup>1</sup> but there is, I think, more to his prohibition of psychological factors than prejudice. Popper wants to exclude psychological statements because such statements, in historiography at least, provide grounds for a case for empathic understanding. It has been argued that some explanations of historical actions are incomplete if they do not convey a notion of the agent's character; and that the agent's character cannot be grasped without the use of empathic understanding on the part of the historian.<sup>2</sup> The force of this argument can best be appreciated by considering an example.

I shall argue that in some cases at least situational analysis cannot provide an adequate explanation without some mention of psychological factors, or "psychological-characterological hypotheses"; and that these indispensable psychological components of explanation cannot be translated into what Popper considers to be "situational elements" or statements of what is objectively appropriate to the situation. Nevertheless, such psychological statements as the historian may need to make in order to provide adequate explanations may be open to criticism, so that Popper's "principle" for prohibiting such statements does not apply. My argument will be based on considering an example of historiographical use of situational analysis which is also relevant to appraising the respective merits of the differing positions of Popper and Collingwood on historical explanation: the recently translated biography

1. Cf. "Science: Conjectures and Refutations", CR, p.35, where Popper reports a "personal experience" with Alfred Adler when the latter interpreted "a case which did not seem to [Popper] particularly Adlerian" in the light of Adler's "theory of inferiority feelings".

Popper's harshness towards the use of psychology in explanations is reminiscent of Collingwood's rather unfair criticism of Dilthey on similar grounds, IH, 171-5.

2. R. Weingartner, attributes this argument to the case for empathic understanding "Historical Explanation", Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967) IV, p.7.

of Caesar by Matthias Gelzer<sup>1</sup>. which is apposite for such an appraisal, as both Popper and Collingwood use Caesar to illustrate their respective views.

## VI. Situational Logic in Use: The Case of Julius Caesar.

Michael Hurst,<sup>2</sup> in reviewing this book, has pointed out that Gelzer employs a situational approach. Gelzer's argument is that Caesar achieved what he did because he recognized the "implications" of the contemporary political situation, to which many of his opponents were blind: that the political structure and constitution of the Roman Republic were no longer adequate for the Empire which had been built

"The old constitutional structure, suited to the needs of a city state, had not surprisingly proved inadequate for coping with the government of an ever-growing empire and control over numerous allies and enemies. As a class the Roman aristocracy failed to grasp the implications of the situation and attempted a mere continuation of the past. One section, the Optimates or Boni, sought to retain oligarchy in full force; the other, dubbed Populares, wished to extend citizenship rights in and out of Rome, but failed to think out any clear long-term ideas as to how the wishes of an extended electorate could operate effectively at a distance when decisions requiring its attention were made by a glorified town meeting in Rome itself. The great factor making for a violent solution to the whole fundamental problem was the development of private armies... Overall, whether Optimates or Populares held temporary sway, the trend was towards a species of licensed anarchy - a trend hardly affected by periodic bouts of conservative dictatorship."

Gelzer uses a situational approach to do more than draw the setting of Caesar's career in broad outlines:

"One of the finest features of this book is the careful presentation of how the various situations facing Caesar were made. Without a due stress upon causation the main threads of the story would become

1. Matthias Gelzer, Caesar: Politician and Statesman, translated by Peter Needham from the 6th edition (1st edition 1921) (Oxford Blackwell, 1968).

2. Michael Hurst, "Hail Caesar", review of Gelzer, op. cit., Scotsman Weekend Review, 16th March, 1968, p.15; the following two citations are taken from Hurst's review.

completely lost. Just how Caesar built up influence in Rome and was elected to office; just how he went to Transpadania and into Gaul; just how his military skill and ability to swing an army against his political opponents [sic]; just how he first needed, acquired and coped with mighty allies; and just how he overcame defections and managed the great military contest with Pompey - all emerge with crystal clarity".

Michael Hurst's praise of Gelzer's use of a situational approach lends support to Popper's contention that historians should and do employ situational analysis.<sup>1</sup> Consideration of Gelzer's argument also bears out Popper's claim that the historian explains by showing how, in this instance, Caesar's actions were "objectively appropriate to the situation"; for Popper considers the information at the agent's disposal to be part of his situation: and this would include Caesar's recognition of the objective possibilities and limitations of the Roman situation, to which many of his contemporaries and opponents were blind. Gelzer's analysis is, as both Popper and Collingwood say their proposals are, objective in the sense that it is "open to rational and empirical criticism and improvement", in Popper's phrase, and in the related sense which Collingwood defends, that the inferences on which the explanation relies can be publicly demonstrated. Again, in corroboration of a point which both Popper and Collingwood make, but of which Collingwood provides the better analysis;<sup>2</sup> Gelzer, in his use of a situational approach, presents Caesar as faced with problems or problem-situations, and Gelzer views Caesar's actions as confronting these problems: the large problem was, as has been noted, what was to be done about the established political framework of the Republic which could not cope with the realities of the Empire.

The issue remains: whether Popper's account of situational logic covers what is involved in Gelzer's use of a situational approach as a historical explanation of Caesar's actions. One question which such an approach to Caesar raises, and which requires an answer if a situational approach is to provide an adequate explanation, is why Caesar was able to see and exploit

1. Eg. PH, 149 and HE, 21-22.

2. Cf. above pp. ~~33-36~~ 135-7



the possibilities of the situation to which so many of the other public figures in Roman life were blind. Gelzer characterizes Caesar as a statesman and also a genius, but he uses these terms only to describe Caesar's ability to take advantage of the situation and to explain his success at doing so.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if it is said that Caesar was a statesman, and all statesmen have the ability to grasp and exploit present circumstances as well as that of leading their "contemporaries in new directions" and thus creating "new circumstances"<sup>2</sup> and that this is what is meant by characterizing someone as a statesman - then I do not think that such an argument would constitute a historical explanation of Caesar's success, although it seems in some respects to conform to the hypothetico-deductive model of explanation: the relevant generalization is a definition.

Gelzer does, I think, succeed in explaining Caesar's ability to see and exploit the objective possibilities of the situation. His explanation rests on the picture he gives of Caesar's character. He describes Caesar as, fundamentally, a bold person, and it is by a "psychological-characterological hypothesis" along these lines that a situational explanation of Caesar's actions must be completed. To consider a specific incident cited by Popper, it was his boldness as much as "his ambition and energy" as Popper says which led him to cross the Rubicon<sup>3</sup>. And the extravagance for which Caesar was notorious in the early part of his career is, I think, another facet of his boldness<sup>4</sup>. Because of his boldness, Caesar was not bound by old ideas and was able to recognise that the established political framework of the Republic was not adequate for the political situation of the Empire.

1. Gelzer, Caesar, p.1, p.123: cf. p.95.

2. A paraphrase of Gelzer's characterization, p.1.

"Two distinct qualities characterize a statesman. One is a quick grasp of and prompt reaction to the circumstances with which he is faced; this can serve the needs of the moment by allowing to take account of existing trends with a clear head. The second, and nobler, is creative political ability, which can lead the statesman's contemporaries in new directions and itself create new circumstances".

3. According to Gelzer (Caesar, p.193) Caesar said "'let the dice fly high'...(quoting a half-line of his favourite Greek poet, Menander), as he crossed the Rubicon..." Gelzer presents Caesar's undertaking "this great gamble" as a bold decision, in which Caesar's recognition of his own energy and ambition gave him confidence (cf.pp.193-4); Popper suggests his explanation, OS, II, 265.

4. Gelzer, Caesar, pp. 30-32.

The hypothesis that Caesar could appreciate and take advantage of the situation, because of his boldness, does not seem to be convertible into the situational terms which Popper thinks acceptable in explanations.<sup>1</sup> This hypothesis is not equivalent to saying that Caesar's behaviour was objectively appropriate to the situation arising from the disparity between the outdated political structure of the Republic and the requirements of the Empire which had been won. It can be said that Caesar's boldness led him to act in ways that were "objectively appropriate" to the situation, because his actions were based on a more accurate comprehension of the situation as it was: his "definition of the situation" was not, as was the case with most other Roman political figures of his day, distorted by viewing it in terms of outdated ideas.<sup>2</sup> But this analysis does not exhaust the content of what is being asserted, which goes beyond what Popper considers to be situational factors: objective conditions, the information which the agents had at their disposal, and purposes which are objectively appropriate to the agent's situation. What is being said is about Caesar as a person, which is needed to explain why Caesar acted in ways that were "objectively appropriate to the situation".

1. Even with the proviso suggested by Chattopadhyaya<sup>pp. 108</sup> (p.108)

"that an explanatory historical situation may consist of elements which are not temporally continuous and spatially contiguous".

2. "Definition of the situation" is a term introduced by W.I. Thomas in about 1918. I agree with Alan Donagan that if situational logic is to give an adequate account of historical explanations, then it must include such a notion:

"...what a man does depends on the situation as he thinks it to be, rather than the situation as it is".

Alan Donagan, "Historical Explanation: The Popper-Hempel Theory Reconsidered" History and Theory, Vol IV (1964) p.18.

I do not think that Popper's inclusion, as "situational elements", of the information at the agent's disposal, or of the agent's aims which were "objectively appropriate" to his situation can be considered to amount to such a notion. For actions may be based on a definition of the situation which includes factors other than those "objective" situational elements. And actions which are completely out of tune with the objective possibilities of their situation may misfire, but they may also be historically important; and their explanation may require grasping the agent's definition of the situation, rather than how his actions were, or were not, "objectively appropriate" to his situation.

Popper's schema of situational logic, then, cannot accommodate a "psychological-characterological hypothesis" which is necessary in this case and I think more generally, if the use of a situational approach is not to raise further questions in the course of providing a partial explanation.

Although such a hypothesis does not conform to Popper's stipulations, it also cannot be excluded on the grounds that Popper gives for rejecting statements as inadmissible to situational analysis if the latter is to be objective. Surely if a historian says that Caesar was able to see the objective possibilities, indeed necessities, of the Roman political situation, to which so many other of his contemporaries were blind, because of his boldness which enabled him to see through and discard outmoded ideas, then the historian's judgment can be appraised in terms of his use of the evidence. Such a hypothesis, although it may be described as "psychological-characterological", is open to "rational and empirical criticism and improvement". Although an acceptable use of evidence is one condition which such a hypothesis can and must meet, there is another condition which must be fulfilled to formulate such a hypothesis as part of a situational explanation.<sup>1</sup>

What is being asserted is not a general law to the effect that boldness in a politician is prerequisite for his discarding outdated ideas which conceal the realities of the situation. Comforting truisms of this order may be mouthed, but they do not perform the requisite explanatory function. Rather, the disposition of boldness is attributed to the historical individual, Caesar, and before a historian can make such an attribution he must, I think, be able to substantiate his judgment from his own experience of human nature. The historian need not be as "war-like" as Genghis Khan in order to appreciate what aspects of the latter's character affected ~~(shaped)~~ his historically important actions,<sup>2</sup> but equally a historian or a critic

1. Cf. W.H. Dray, Laws and Explanation in History (Oxford, 1957) p.128

2. J.W.N. Watkins uses the example of Genghis Khan in criticism of Hayek's views on empathy, in "Ideal Types and Historical Explanation," British Journal for the Philosophy of Science v. 2(1952), pp. 38-39.



who is defective, so to speak, in his experience of human nature may be unable to appreciate some of the judgments which an adequate situational explanation may require. Women, lacking the experience which most men had as schoolboys of fighting, may have as a consequence, certain deficiencies in their understanding of military history and perhaps also of political in-fighting. It is in this sense that empathic understanding is required to construct an adequate situational explanation; and, as has been said earlier, those statements which may be described as broadly psychological, and to which Popper raises untenable objections, make the need for such empathic understanding clear; and it is for this reason rather than on the grounds of his avowed principles that Popper seeks, throughout his discussions of situational logic, to eliminate such statements from historical explanations.

If historically important actions can be explained in terms of how sane men act, as a general rule, or in terms of their divergence from a model of what a rational action would be in the circumstances, or as objectively appropriate to situations which can be objectively analysed, then the historian has no need for empathic understanding; but limitations to all these criteria have been canvassed above.<sup>1</sup> And if, as has been argued, a situational approach, as Popper delineates it, raises questions in the course of providing partial explanations, then there is an opening for the case that an exercise of empathic understanding is a logical condition<sup>2</sup> for providing adequate situational explanations; an attempt has been made above to outline just such a case. Nor is such an exercise of empathic understanding a matter of untestable intuitions, for in appraising the historian's judgments, appeal may be made both to the available evidence and to that experience of human nature common to the historian and his critical colleagues; one may hope for criticism also from a lay audience on this latter basis as well.

1. Cf. above, pp. ~~123-130~~ 123-130, 145-148

2. W.H. Dray, op. cit., p.128

Although similarities have been noted above, between Popper and Collingwood's respective views of historical explanation, it was also observed that these views dealt with only one of several kinds of historical explanation. It was suggested, further, that Popper's views hint at, and may perhaps impede investigation of, the social conditions which may be brought in to explain historical actions in their situations; whereas Collingwood's concentration on reflective acts does not seem to allow for this latter kind of approach to historical explanation. Popper's theory of situational logic, then, suffers from two kinds of limitations: as will be seen, Popper's stipulations as to the investigation of the social conditions of actions may not be altogether fruitful;<sup>1</sup> and his prohibition of psychological hypotheses from situational logic has the result that this approach raises questions in the course of constructing explanations within the terms that Popper allows.

1. Cf. chapter six below.

## Chapter Four

## Popper's Historicism

## Contents

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- II. A Summary of Popper's Analysis
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## I. Anti-Naturalistic and Pro-Naturalistic Historicism

Historicism is a linchpin in Popper's thought on history and the social sciences. Popper thinks that much is awry in these disciplines, due to what he calls historicism. Historicism provides the focus for Popper's criticism of history and the social sciences, and for his recommendations of methodological reforms in these disciplines. Popper's ideas on historical explanation, as well as his proposals for historiography<sup>1</sup>, are meant to replace doctrines which he criticizes and attributes to historicism. Thus, what Popper opposes and what he advocates are correlated through his concept of historicism.

Historicism, as Popper understands it, is an intricate interlocking of doctrines which issues in claims, which Popper thinks illfounded, to prophesy the future from certain configurations of historical events: namely, alleged developmental laws which turn out to be no more than historical trends. Popper thinks that many of the fallacious arguments in support of the prophetic ends of historicism refer to what are alleged to be distinctively historical methods,<sup>2</sup> uniquely applicable to the study of social life.

Popper's central discussion of historicism, The Poverty of Historicism, is an enigmatic book. To modify Popper's characteristic metaphor,<sup>3</sup> the reader may well feel that he is obliquely positioned with respect to some sharp searchlight which casts clearly delineated shadows of some indeterminate objects: the formal lucidity of Popper's presentation does not suffice to identify historicism; the recital of doctrines does not pin down

1. Popper's ideas on historical explanation are discussed above, in Chapters Two and Three; Popper's proposals for historiography are considered in Chapter Five.

2. On historicism as historical method: OS, I, 23; OS, I, 75; OS, I, 290; OS, II, 7; OS, II, 37; OS, II, 87; OS, II, 106; OS, II, 319 (note 2(2) to chapter 13); cf. OS, II, 59, where Popper says, in connection with his critique of Hegel, that historicism is not history; PH, 34; PH, 45; PH, 50; "What is Dialectics", CR, p.333.

3. His "searchlight theory of science" (OS, II, 260). Cf. also his discussion of historical interpretations as searchlights, OS, II, 268-9 (chap.25 end of sec. iii).

their exponents. The ideas that Popper ascribes to these mysterious, and for the most part nameless, historicists seem on the face of it to be a mixed kettle of fish. And there are difficulties, both in reconciling Popper's analytic treatment of historicism with his examples of arch-historicists, Plato, Hegel and Marx,<sup>1</sup> and also, by extension, in finding further examples to support Popper's claim that the social sciences are permeated by historicism.

Some critics have argued that historicism is little more than a composite of Popper's prejudices:<sup>2</sup> that what Popper presents and criticizes in The Poverty of Historicism is not a "subtle"<sup>3</sup> and coherent method which, by intricate means, issues in prophecies, but rather a ragbag of doctrines which Popper dislikes. As the starting point for historicism, Popper caricatures something very much like Historismus, or the "German Idea of History"<sup>4</sup> a view of historical and cultural studies prevalent in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to which the methods of the natural sciences, theoretical and experimental, were inapplicable to the study of historical and cultural phenomena if the distinctively human character of such phenomena was to be apprehended; the subject matter of

1. That Plato is not a historicist in Popper's sense is argued by W.H. Walsh in "Plato and the Philosophy of History: History and Theory in the Republic", History and Theory II(1962), 3-16. A comparison of Popper's schema of historicism in PH, with the views of Hegel and Marx is sketched below, sec. iv (p. ~~272~~ <sup>272-273</sup> 272-273).

2. A position congenial to such blatant Marxists as James Petras ("Popperism: the Scarcity of Reason", Science and Society, 1966 30(1): 1-10); taken also by such a sophisticated Marxist as Herbert Marcuse ("Notes on the Problem of Historical Laws", Partisan Review, 1959, 26: 117-129, especially p.123, 126-9) and also by a less committed critic, W.H. Walsh (review of The Poverty of Historicism, Philosophy 35(1960), 358.)

3. PH, vii (preface).

4. George G. Iggers, "The Dissolution of German Historism," Ideas in History, essays presented to Louis Gottschalk by his former students, edited by Richard Herr and Harold T. Parker (Duke Univ. Press, Durham N.C., 1965) pp. 288-329.

"When we speak of historism or of the 'German idea of history' in this paper we are speaking of the main tradition of German historiography and historical thought that followed Wilhelm von Humboldt and Ranke and that emerged in the revolt against the Enlightenment doctrine of natural law". (p.289).

these disciplines enjoined its own mode of appreciation. Popper argues that the apparatus of historicist prophecy presupposes these claims for a distinctive historical method. The alleged connection between the apparatus of historicist prophecy and the claims for a distinctive historical method, which to Popper's thinking has been overlooked, may seem at best forced, and may well be at odds with logic.

If the critics' contention is not without substance, and Popper's analysis of historicism is based on prejudices rather than logic, then Popper's claim of "something like scientific status" for his analysis of historicist method in The Poverty of Historicism<sup>1</sup> is seriously undermined, if not confuted. If some of the links that Popper finds between the various doctrines he calls historicist are matters of opinion and not of logic, as I shall argue, then Popper's case for the emergence of historicist prophecy from the premises of Historicism does not meet his own criteria for the objectivity, or intersubjective testability, of scientific results. For then one must agree with some of Popper's opinions which buttress his argument, at the expense of logic, in order to accept some of the connections that he finds between historicist doctrines. For a doctrinal analysis to be scientific, as Popper understands science, it cannot hinge upon an untestable point of view; it is because of just such dependence on untestable points of view that Popper argues, in the much anthologized last chapter of The Open Society and its Enemies, that historical interpretations cannot convey objective representations of the past. A doctrinal analysis of a scientific ilk must rest on objective connections of ideas which may be acknowledged without any commitments other than to logic.

In The Poverty of Historicism, Popper presents historicism as a purportedly coherent method that obtains historical prophecies from trends or developmental laws of history, backed up by certain distinctive methods for

1. OS, I, 3. Popper writes that "the systematic analysis of historicism" which can only refer to The Poverty of Historicism, "aims at something like scientific status".



the study of society. Popper does not approach historicism by starting from what actual historicists have held, but rather, by constructing a schema of the arguments to which a consistent historicist ought to subscribe if he acknowledges the logical implications of his claim that historians or sociologists can prophesy the future from historical trends. If Popper is to make good his claim that he has worked out the best possible case for the "subtle logic" of historicist prophecy, prior to exposing historicism as untenable,<sup>1</sup> then he must show how anti-naturalistic historicism, a view that the methods of the social sciences differ from those of the natural sciences, is logically connected with the view that it is the cardinal task of the social sciences to prophesy. Some of the doctrines which Popper classes under anti-naturalistic historicism - such as the futility of experiments in studying society, the complexity of social life, and the subjective character of social and historical knowledge - have been held by reputable historians and philosophers, concerned to defend the distinctive features of historical knowledge from the dominant model of the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> The logic of Popper's presentation of historicism seems to be that, if one subscribes to a sufficient number of the anti-naturalistic doctrines, one is then logically committed to historical prophecy on the basis of trends. If this is the case, then the aforementioned historians and philosophers were unwittingly committed to historicist prophecies which they did not make and sometimes denied that it was possible to make. But what Popper offers in the way of logical links between the anti-naturalistic position and the historicist prophecy are tenuous when they are not untenable.

The backbone for Popper's presentation of a "well-considered"<sup>1</sup> case for historicist prophecy, as the task of the social sciences, is the distinction

1. PH, vii, and p.3.

2. Recently G. Kitson Clark (The Critical Historian, London, 1967) 19-31 has maintained the first two of the above mentioned doctrines, in a contrast of history with science.

3. PH, p.3.

he draws between pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic approaches to questions of method in the social sciences. Popper classifies the "schools of thought interested in the methods of" the social sciences

"according to their views on the applicability of the methods of physics...as pro-naturalistic or as anti-naturalistic; labelling them 'pro-naturalistic' or 'positive' if they favour the application of the methods of physics to the social sciences, and 'anti-naturalistic' or 'negative' if they oppose the use of these methods". 1.

In support of the point of view represented by this distinction, Popper argues that the methods of physics constitute a much misunderstood paradigm for scientific knowledge in all disciplines.

The "characteristic approach" of historicism, says Popper, combines both kinds of approaches, anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic.<sup>2</sup> Thus a consistent case for historicist prophecy, according to Popper, involves a shifting attitude to the methods of physics. How, then, does Popper account for the coherence of historicist method if it combines two such antithetical attitudes to the methods of physics as the anti-naturalistic and the pro-naturalistic? The consistent arguments which Popper provides for historicism seem to be based on an initial inconsistency.

Maurice Mandelbaum has argued that the purport of Popper's distinction is to draw attention to a common methodological principle shared by pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic approaches alike: attempts to establish developmental laws, and attempts to view historical events in terms of unique processes both employ a genetic approach in explaining and evaluating past events. Mandelbaum writes:

"As Popper's distinction makes clear, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, forms of what has been termed 'naturalism' have closely resembled anti-naturalistic theories with regard to their presuppositions about the relation of historical change to the explanation of events...What is

1. PH, p. 2.

2. PH, p.3.

presupposed in all explanations and evaluations of past events [is] that each event is to be understood by viewing it in terms of a larger process of which it was a phase, or in which it played a part; and that only through understanding the nature of this process can one fully understand or evaluate concrete events." 1.

Thus Mandelbaum argues that one outcome of Popper's discussion of historicism is to exhibit an analogy between positivistic and anti-positivistic views of historical change. While this may well be what Popper's discussion achieves, it seems to me that Popper wants to demonstrate a rather different and more problematical point: that anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism are linked by more than analogous views of the import of historical processes; that these doctrines are logically complementary.

Popper argues that the anti-naturalistic doctrines are logically required to support the pro-naturalistic case for prophecy. And more startlingly, the drift of his presentation is that the anti-naturalistic historicist, by holding that the methods appropriate to the study of human affairs involve an individualizing, genetic approach, and are legitimately

1. "Historicism", The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards, (N.Y. and London, 1967), IV, 27.  
Compare F.A. Hayek (The Counter-Revolution of Science, paper-back ed. Free Press, 1964), p.67.

"...historicism...is used in two different and in some respect opposite and yet frequently confused senses: for the older view which justly contrasted the specific task of the historian with that of the scientist and which denied the possibility of a theoretical science of history, and for the later view which on the contrary, affirms that history is the only road which can lead to a theoretical science of social phenomena. However great is the contrast between these two views sometimes called 'historicism' if we take them in their extreme forms, they have yet enough in common to have made possible a gradual and almost unperceived transition from the historical method of the historian to the scientific historicism which attempts to make history a 'science' and the only science of social phenomena".



distinct from the methods of the natural sciences, is thereby logically committed to the pro-naturalistic view that historicist prophecy is the cardinal task of the social sciences. Thus Popper is claiming that an anti-naturalistic historicist shares more than a rather general methodological principle with the pro-naturalistic historicist; the way in which the anti-naturalist implements this principle logically commits him to pro-naturalistic prophesy.

In Mandelbaum's interpretation, Popper's distinction is more innocuous than what I have suggested. The grounds for construing Popper as maintaining that anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism are logically connected in the way I have sketched are in textual evidence and in Popper's usage of the term "historicism".

It would be careless and it might be misleading to call Popper's account of "historicism" a definition. Popper nowhere speaks of defining "historicism", because he objects to the plenitude of essences that he thinks the customary uncritical use of definitions, for which he blames Aristotle, generates. In a sound usage of terms, as in the natural sciences, Popper says that there are no such illegitimate ontological implications. Words are introduced because they are "useful" or "convenient" "to describe how things behave".<sup>1</sup> Popper intends his usage of "historicism" to be in line with the scientific procedure of definition, not the malpractice due to Aristotle, as can be seen from the qualifications with which Popper introduces the term:

"...I have deliberately chosen the somewhat unfamiliar label 'historicism'. By introducing it I hope I shall avoid merely verbal quibbles: for nobody, I hope, will be tempted to question whether any of the arguments here discussed really or properly or essentially belong to historicism, or what the word 'historicism' really or properly or essentially means". 2.

1. PH, p.29.

2. PH, 3-4.

That is, Popper warns against imputing an essence, as in an Aristotelian definition, to historicism.

The convenience and utility of the term "historicism" must be that the various doctrines thus catalogued are not disparate or unrelated, but take their place in the "logic" of historicism. Thus, to establish that historicism is well defined, meeting the criteria he gives for scientific definitions, Popper must show that its anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic aspects are logically connected. If these two sets of doctrines are merely compatible, rather than necessarily connected, or worse still, are incompatible, then Popper has not made good his claim to have constructed a "well-considered and close-knit" case for historicism.

Popper writes of his presentation of historicism that he has "tried to present historicism as a well-considered and close-knit philosophy...I have not hesitated to construct arguments in its support which have never, to my knowledge, been brought forward by historicists themselves...I have tried to perfect a theory which has often been put forward, but perhaps never in a fully developed form". 1.

Popper is claiming, in other words, to have constructed the best possible case for historicism by logical means: supplying the presuppositions of certain arguments and eliciting the consequences of these arguments.

More specifically, Popper writes that

"In analysing historicism, I found that it needs what I now call methodological essentialism; i.e. I saw that the typical arguments in favour of essentialism are bound up with historicism..." 2.

Popper introduces essentialism as part of his elaboration of the historicist case; and the same may be said more generally of his approach to anti-naturalistic historicism. Thus Popper's claim is that the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic <sup>doctrines</sup> constitute a logical nexus.

1. PH, p.3.      2. OS, I, 216, note 30 to chap. 3.

There are several instances in The Poverty of Historicism where Popper says quite explicitly that the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines cohere in the method of historicist prophecy.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the "central historicist doctrine" of evolutionary laws or historical trends interweaves both kinds of doctrines. Moreover, one can detect in Popper's presentation of certain doctrines the underpinnings for his allegation that the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines are conjoined in historicism. For example, intuitive understanding may start from an "imaginative reconstruction" of purposeful activities, but a logical realization of the fullest understanding of social events requires the framework of

1. E.G. PH, 3 (cited above, p. 156) and PH, 35-36:

"Although historicism is fundamentally anti-naturalistic it is by no means opposed to the idea that there is a common element in the methods of the physical and social sciences. This may be due to the fact that historicists as a rule adopt the view (which I fully share) that sociology, like physics, is a branch of knowledge which aims, at the same time, to be theoretical and empirical...It follows that certain methods - prediction with the help of laws, and the testing of laws by observation - must be common to physics and sociology.

"I fully agree with this view, in spite of the fact that I consider it to be one of the basic assumptions of historicism. But I do not agree with the more detailed development of this view which leads to a number of ideas which...involve other assumptions, namely the anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism; and more especially, the doctrine of historical laws or trends."

What Popper says, PH, 105-106

"The doctrines of historicism which I have called 'pro-naturalistic' have much in common with its anti-naturalistic doctrines. They are, for example influenced by holistic thinking and they spring from a misunderstanding of the methods of the natural sciences....(they also share) a view of society moving a series of periods..."

might be thought to support Mandelbaum's interpretation of the relationship between pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism. But if the "central historicist doctrine" of "laws of evolution" unites both kinds of doctrines (PH, 36, 41-42, 45), then they are more than analogous and they must be logically connected.



historical trends, that framework which is implicated in historicist prophecy. The elaboration of the anti-naturalistic position, in Popper's view, commits the adherent to pro-naturalistic historicism and prophecy.

Although Popper presents some sort of a case for connecting the pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic ideas of historicism in a coherent methodology, it is nonetheless difficult to see how an adherent of some of the anti-naturalistic doctrines is thereby committed to a belief in ascertaining the future direction of history from trends. This question is more than academic, so to speak, because what Popper describes as anti-naturalistic historicism so closely resembles Historismus:<sup>1</sup> a cluster of ideas on history and its methods which was in formation in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and which was much debated and disputed from the appearance of Nietzsche's essay on The Use and Abuse of History in 1874 to the publication of Meinecke's Die Entstehung des Historismus in 1936.

One characteristic claim of Historismus was that the methods of the historical or cultural studies (Geisteswissenschaften), for which history was paradigmatic, were distinct from those of the natural sciences. Various cases were made, coming under Historismus, for distinctive methods in historical studies. It was said that the historian studied supra-personal, concrete individuals, recalcitrant to the generalizing approach of the natural sciences: they were realized in process or development, and consequently were to be apprehended by an individualizing and genetic approach. A somewhat different argument held that historical phenomena involved man and his mental or spiritual life, which was embodied in social artifacts: thus the characteristic features of social and cultural phenomena could not be grasped by the methods of science, but required a special approach. Such emphases on the distinctively historical character of social phenomena were associated with theories of the historical constitution of knowledge of these phenomena.

Popper's argument would lead us to believe that a consistent advocate of Historismus is, perhaps unwittingly, logically committed to a belief in

1. Cf. p. 153 above.

historical prophecy. If Popper is correct in arguing that anyone who subscribes to a sufficient number of the anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism must consequently adhere to historical prophecy, then he has reached a startling result which would be disavowed by most if not all representatives of Historismus, who would argue that the significant features of history which distinguish it from the natural sciences make attempts at historical prophecy irrelevant if not self-contradictory.

In The Poverty of Historicism, Popper does not mention Historismus as an instance of anti-naturalistic historicism. He names few names throughout his presentation of anti-naturalistic historicism.<sup>1</sup> He draws a distinction, which seems to me rather fragile, between "the somewhat unfamiliar label historicism", which he deliberately chose "to avoid merely verbal quibbles", and historism, which may be a transliteration of Historismus. Historicism, as Popper analyses it, is a doctrine with manifold ramifications. Historism, which "must not" "be confused with what I call historicism" is

"a theory which emphasizes the historical dependence  
of our opinions"

or

"a general principle of the historical determination  
of all thought..." 2.

The difficulty with Popper's distinction is that some of the doctrines which Popper attributes to historicism, such as the shaping of social life by historical periods, would also seem to imply a similar historical relativism, as might the historicity of social life, involved in the pro-naturalistic doctrine that the social sciences are "nothing but history".<sup>3</sup> Historism undeniably suggests Historismus, which has elements in common with what Popper calls historicism.

1. PH, 5-34. Marx is called "a famous historicist" on page 8 and names of essentialists appear in the section on methodological essentialism.

2. OS, II, 208; PHp.17; OS, II, 208; OS, II, 255.

3. PH, p.45: "social science is nothing but history".

There is, moreover, clearcut evidence that Popper recognized some reference to Historismus in his discussion of anti-naturalistic historicism in The Poverty of Historicism. In a review published shortly after the first appearance of "The Poverty of Historicism" in Economica;<sup>1</sup>. Popper considered a book on the subject of Historismus: The Growth of German Historicism by Friedrich Engel-Janosi.<sup>2</sup> In this book, Engel-Janosi discussed the historiographical ideas of such figures as Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Niebuhr, Ranke, Hegel and Marx, who were major figures in the formation of the "German Idea of History"<sup>3</sup>. Popper writes that

"by 'historicism' the author [Engel-Janosi] understands an attitude of philosophy which is 'centred around history', which looks upon 'most spheres of intellectual life as permeated by history', and which makes history 'the magistra, if not of active life, at least to a great extent of theoretical life'....I have no quarrel with his definition since I have used the term in a similar sense". 4.

Thus the connection of anti-naturalistic historicism with Historismus is inescapable, permitting names to be supplied which were lacking in Popper's presentation of anti-naturalistic historicism: representatives of Historismus are among the anti-naturalistic historicists, and the acuity of Popper's construal of historicism can be gauged by examples. Popper's acknowledgement of Historismus as historicist requires, I think, that he withdraw his disjunction of historicism and historism, because the claim that knowledge depends on its historical context, which Popper attempted to dissociate from his usage of historicism, is an aspect of Historismus.

But Historismus is relevant to more than this fine point of Popper's

1. "The Poverty of Historicism" was published, in Economica, in three parts (vol. xx, 11, p. 44, no. 42; vol. 11, 1949, no. 43 and vol. 12, 1945, no. 46); Popper's review of Engel-Janosi's book appeared in Economica v. 12 (1945).

2. John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series LXII, no. 2 (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1944).

3. Georg Iggers' phrase, see above, p. 153, note 4

4. "The Growth of German Historicism," Economica 12(1945), p. 259.



analysis. It can be used to test whether the drift of Popper's argument, in connecting pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism, is correct or misguided. If actual representatives of Historismus remain within the anti-naturalistic ideas and do not draw the conclusions which Popper maintains these premises entail, Popper might argue, albeit implausibly, that these thinkers have not recognised the logical consequences of their tenets. But if some representatives of Historismus maintain that their premises preclude certain ideas - namely, the historical or developmental laws which Popper says are logically connected with these premises - then Popper's arguments and the arguments of Historismus must be compared and examined, to see which of these conflicting positions is the logical consequence of the anti-naturalistic views.

## II. A Summary of Popper's Analysis

Popper presents his case for the coherence of anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism by developing an idea that clearly alludes to Marx: namely, that those laws of social life which resemble scientific laws in making assertions about uniformities, are in the end unlike scientific laws because there are no significant social uniformities which "persist" beyond the confines of a single historical period.<sup>1</sup> Such social laws as the "economic laws of the feudal period..."<sup>2</sup> appertain only to particular historical periods, and not to the whole span of history. Popper thus allocates to anti-naturalistic historicism the argument that because all significant social uniformities are restricted to particular historical periods, sociologists cannot formulate universally valid generalizations along the lines of scientific theories.

As Popper develops the anti-naturalistic position, further obstacles

1. PH, 6-8.

2. PH, p.5-6, an evident allusion to Marx.

appear to applying scientific procedures to the study of social life: useful social experiments are out of the question, and there can be no exact social predictions with which to pin down the future.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, social groups are wholes, inaccessible to analysis by the atomistic procedures of the physical sciences.<sup>2</sup> Scientific methods cannot be applied to social life, due to the complexity of the latter by comparison with nature: artificially isolated experiments are out of the question, and more importantly, "social life...presupposes the mental life of individuals".<sup>3</sup>

This characteristic and distinctive feature of social phenomena accounts for the lack of long-term uniformities in social life, and has further consequences: there can be no "real repetition"<sup>4</sup> in social life because any social event has some impact, however small, on the mental life of the persons absorbed in social life, with the consequence that no event can be an exact repetition, because its precedents have left residues.<sup>5</sup> Social phenomena are thus characterized by "intrinsic" novelty.<sup>6</sup> Social phenomena must be

1. The reasons Popper gives for these points are not immediately relevant to my argument. They are, in brief: social experiments are of limited applicability for the same reason as social uniformities are of limited scope: because a change in historical period rescinds all statements as to the characteristics of social life. Thus social experiments, were they possible, would only be applicable to a particular period. Experiments conducted in artificial isolation, in imitation of science cannot be relevant to social life as it is. Experiments in the thick of things are distorted by interested motives, such as a desire for political success.

If a social prediction is made, it is in principle possible for those whom it affects either to learn of the prediction or to reproduce it, and then, on the basis of their foreknowledge, to act so as to falsify the predicted results.

2. Holism is discussed in chapter six, "Social Policy and Social Concepts".

3. PH, p.12.

4. PH, p.10.

5. PH, 9-10. The resultant novelty of social phenomena would seem to imply, not that social uniformities cannot be universally valid but must be restricted to periods, but that there can be no real social uniformities, even restricted, in social life. Popper does not take account of this point, with consequences, as I shall argue, for the alleged coherence of his analysis of historicism.

6. PH, p. 10.

appraised qualitatively, not quantitatively: they must be understood in terms of purpose and meaning, which rule out causal explanation, as in physics. The sociologist thus relies on intuitive understanding, to apprehend social phenomena for what they are. Social phenomena undergo pervasive change and for criteria by which to identify what persists of such transformed social entities, the social scientist must intuit their essences: a procedure which contrasts with the approach of the natural scientist, who is not concerned with essences but with "how things behave"<sup>1</sup>.

The pro-naturalistic historicist argues that in spite of, indeed because of, such obstacles as the anti-naturalist stresses to simple analogies between the natural and the social sciences, there is a fundamental similarity between the two sets of disciplines, in that both aim at making predictions: the social sciences exploit the differences noted by the anti-naturalist in pursuit of this common aim. The distinctive features of the social sciences, noted by the anti-naturalist, can be subsumed under procedures analogous to those of some of the natural sciences: thus the social sciences have a share in the techniques of prediction. Astronomy exemplifies the parallels between sociological prediction and prediction in the natural sciences. Although the inexactitude of social predictions, on account of their repercussions, actual and potential, make them useless in the short-run, the importance of long-term predictions, says the pro-naturalist, can well outweigh their inexactitude.<sup>2</sup> Although social experiments are, for the most part, futile where they are not impossible, sociology, the pro-naturalistic historicist continues, has nonetheless an empirical basis, which is observational rather than experimental: namely, history.<sup>3</sup>

As in physics and astronomy, so in sociology "the general case" is considered: both issue in dynamics, or the explanation of changes in terms of forces.<sup>4</sup> The lack of long-term social uniformities is not an insuperable obstacle to formulating a theory of social dynamics. The pro-naturalistic case for the possibility in principle of such a theory starts from the anti-naturalistic contention that there are no social uniformities "invariably

1. PH, p.29. 2. PH, pp.35-38. 3. PH, pp.38-39. 4. PH, pp.39-41.



valid through space and time".<sup>1.</sup> Thus "real social laws", if they are to "apply to the whole of human history" cannot be based on those social uniformities which are necessarily restricted to single periods:

"Thus the only universally valid laws of society must be the laws which link up the successive periods. They must be laws of historical development which determine the transition from one period to another. This is what historicists mean by saying that the only real laws of sociology are historical laws." 2.

The remainder of Popper's presentation of pro-naturalistic historicism is an exegesis of the consequences of the historicist combination of pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic ideas in the theory of historical trends. Because the historicist insists that social experiments are futile, what he says about prediction as the aim of sociology must, says Popper, be interpreted as an insistence that the social sciences prophesy developments beyond our control. Popper derives this construal of historicist prediction from the historicist's rejection of social experiments as futile. Experiments permit us to calculate the results of certain actions and thus to react constructively in situations where experimental knowledge can be applied. We can thus predict our course of action. To reject experiments as futile entails that such constructive action and constructive prediction are impossible. Acquiescence is the only option. Thus the historicist's denial of the possibility of social experiments implies that he believes social events can only be prophesied as beyond our capabilities to prevent or react constructively upon.

Thus, rather than pursue the will-o-the-wisp of social planning, initiating and carrying through significant modifications in social life - a completely misconceived enterprise in the eyes of the historicist - the historicist recommends interpretation of history as the most positive form of

1. PH, p.41.

2. PH, p.41.

3. Which Popper calls "technological prediction" PH, p. 43.

4. PH, 42-46.

action under the limitations he has discerned: by interpretation of history he means apprising oneself and others of the developments which the future has in store.<sup>1</sup>

Sociology, as understood by the historicist, is through and through historical. Not only is its empirical basis "nothing but" history, but the theory of prophecy by means of developmental laws is historical, because these laws are historical laws. Sociology, then, is a "theoretical history", devoted to discovering the "general trends underlying social developments", to which we may at best adjust if we are aware of them, but which we can do little to control. The best part of action is to prophesy what is inevitable, and to acquiesce in it. Thus the full-blown historicist.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Historicism and Historismus

A consistent and well-developed case for historicist prophecy, according to Popper, would appear to rest on a paradoxical combination of ideas: the historicist begins by denying the applicability of certain scientific methods to the study of social life, and finishes by adopting methods which he claims parallel those of the natural sciences, in procedures and in results. Popper claims to soften this paradox, in his criticism of historicism, by exposing the pro-naturalistic doctrines of historicism to be based on misunderstandings of the methods of physics. Moreover, somewhat differently, Popper suggests that the pro-naturalistic historicist's professions of solidarity with science should not be taken at face-value, for

1. PH, 49-52

2. PH, 45-48.

behind them lie anti-naturalistic assumptions.<sup>1.</sup>

What Popper calls the pro-naturalistic doctrines of historicism are, I think, pseudo-naturalistic or speciously naturalistic, not because, as Popper argues in his critique, they are based on misunderstandings of the methods of physics, but because, in Popper's presentation, these alleged applications of the methods of physics turn out to presuppose anti-naturalistic ideas:

"the more detailed development of [pro-naturalistic historicism] involve[s] other assumptions, namely the anti-naturalistic doctrines; and more especially, the doctrine of historical trends". 2.

Popper's argument for the interlacing of anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic ideas, in historicism, is that the central historicist doctrine of historical trends or developmental laws derives from inverting the claim, which Popper attributes to anti-naturalistic historicism, that there are no universally valid sociological generalizations, but only generalizations restricted to periods, because there are no significant long-term uniformities in social life.

Popper does not support his case for the concatenation of pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic doctrines in the "characteristic approach" of historicism, by exhibiting the workings of this combination in the case of

1. PH, p. 36. Thus the outcome of Popper's discussion of historicism may be to show his fundamental distinction between pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic approaches to questions of methods to be superficial, for Popper's distinction, as he applies it, appears to be based on what methodologists say about their proposals, which may be at odds with the actual character of their proposals. That is, Popper calls part of historicism pro-naturalistic because its adherents profess solidarity with the methods of science, even though they rely on anti-naturalistic doctrines. If Popper's distinction is not superficial, then it is only an artificial device of exposition, which Popper adopts as a convenient division in his presentation.

2. PH, p. 36.



any actual historicist.<sup>1</sup> Through lack of germane examples, Popper's case for the coherence of the doctrines that he calls "historicism" hangs in the air; Popper's omission of such examples accounts in part for the enigmatic quality of The Poverty of Historicism.

Do the connections which Popper proposes between the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines stand up to examination? I shall argue that some of the doctrines which Popper presents in support of his chosen starting point for anti-naturalistic historicism - the limitations of social uniformities and of corresponding generalizations - are in fact incompatible with this point. Moreover, these incompatible doctrines are not excrescences on anti-naturalistic historicism, but on the contrary, its centre. To compound the difficulties in Popper's case, the claims for developmental laws are also incompatible with the heart of anti-naturalistic historicism. Moreover, the claims for historical or developmental laws are not inextricably bound up with the assertion of limited social uniformities, as Popper suggests; they are at best weakly connected with this latter idea, in that they are not incompatible with it. These claims are at most an option but not an obligation for the adherent of limited uniformities and restricted generalizations. Thus Popper's historicism does not cohere: it decomposes because the doctrine of intrinsic social novelty and its amplification is incompatible with even limited social uniformities, and because the crucial connection between such uniformities and developmental laws is not as "close-knit" as Popper's case requires.

The several points of weakness which I shall consider in Popper's case for the logical connections between the various historicist doctrines are relevant to the concrete issue raised above: whether adherents of Historicism, and anti-naturalistic views of historical and sociological methods more generally, are logically if unwittingly committed to a belief in prophecy by means of trends. Or to put the point more strikingly, whether

1. See below, section IV (p. <sup>180-187</sup>~~186~~), on whether Hegel and Marx are historicists in the sense of Popper's schema in The Poverty of Historicism.

one must agree to Popper's view that there are no major methodological idiosyncrasies in history and the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> or fall into historicism; that the unity of scientific method, applied to history and the social sciences, is the only escape from historicism.

Popper, in his choice of a starting point for presenting historicism, alludes to Marx's idea that the laws of economics are peculiar to each epoch. The argument which Popper says is brought in support of this claim is that if there are no significant social uniformities which persist beyond the confines of a social period, as the anti-naturalistic historicist claims, then the validity of any generalization based on such uniformities must be restricted. As scientific theories are valid without condition or time or space, social laws thus turn out to be rather different from scientific laws.

In allegedly developing this case for the limitations of social uniformities and of the corresponding laws, Popper covers a wide range of objections against applying methods analogous to those of the natural sciences in the study of social life. The connection of some of these doctrines with the restricted scope of social uniformities may be tenuous, or worse. Marx might not have acknowledged these ideas as necessary to substantiate his restriction of various laws of economics to particular historical epochs.

Further, if the anti-naturalistic position which Popper presents is taken seriously, it would seem to debar those developmental laws which Popper elicits from the historicist conviction that all social uniformities are restricted to historical periods, as well as precluding limited generalizations based on restricted uniformities. Laws of either kind are impossible on some of the premises which Popper attributes to anti-naturalistic historicism, and which are central to this view. If there can be no "real repetition" in history, positing any uniformities whatsoever is incompatible with the

1. Situational logic, as Popper conceives it, is not altogether a deviation from scientific method: for Popper claims that it is objective. Cf. chapter three above.

"intrinsic" novelty of historical phenomena. Consequently, there can be no generalizations about these phenomena, even restricted to periods.

The argument of "intrinsic" novelty, which Popper attributes to the anti-naturalistic historicist, is akin to the claims made in Historismus for the uniqueness or individuality of historical phenomena. Popper says that the historicist claim that social experiments cannot be reproduced because there is no "real repetition" in social life, derives from the intrinsic novelty or uniqueness of historical phenomena, which is in turn due to their "presuppos[ing] the mental life of individuals".<sup>1</sup> In the arguments for the distinctive character of the historical sciences, the individuality or uniqueness of historical phenomena was brought to the fore; it was sometimes said that the historical sciences required a distinctive approach, irreducible to scientific methods, to apprehend individuality in phenomena interwoven with mental life. Individuality could be grasped by an idiographic approach, but not by a nomothetic or generalizing approach.

Thus, some of the doctrines that Popper attributes to anti-naturalistic historicism, which have correlates in Historismus, are incompatible with the starting point which Popper chooses for his presentation of anti-naturalistic historicism: namely that those social laws which are based on uniformities, and thus analogous to the laws of the natural sciences, are unlike the laws of the natural sciences in being restricted to periods. The argument with which Popper provides the historicist, about the novelty of social phenomena, entails that such phenomena are unique; or, in the terminology usual to Historismus, social entities are supra-personal individuals.<sup>2</sup> If historical phenomena are consistently novel, or unique, there can be no actual uniformity among such individual phenomena. Generalizations based on uniformities would be distortions. Thus the doctrine of intrinsic novelty implies that generalization is irrelevant to the characteristic features of social phenomena.

1. PH, p.12.

2. See Hayek, The Counter-Revolution of Science p.216 (note 64 to Part I) on this terminology.



This contradiction in Popper's presentation of historicism cannot be put right. Matters cannot be amended by dropping the troublesome doctrine of the "intrinsic" novelty of social phenomena from the catalogue of anti-naturalistic doctrines, for this concept cannot be neatly excised. It is because social phenomena involve "the mental life of individuals" that these phenomena are intrinsically novel. This same characteristic feature accounts for their complexity, as well as the impossibility of exact social predictions; for this reason also intuitive understanding, and not causal explanation, is the appropriate method for apprehending such phenomena.

In short, central to anti-naturalistic historicism is the claim that because the historian or social scientist studies human action, he cannot apply the methods of the natural sciences. The central issues of the anti-naturalistic position revolve around the claim that there is something distinctive about human action which removes it from the ken of the natural sciences. The proposal to exempt human action from the procedures of the natural sciences is an interesting problem, of considerable importance for the philosophy of history. Popper, in criticizing historicism, does not consider this issue systematically, on its merits and demerits, of which it has both, but only indirectly. First, Popper claims that such a view issues in the doctrine of intuitive understanding, a doctrine which Popper presents as though its logical working out requires the doctrine of historical trends; and then discards its more innocent forms as untestable and thus no more than a heuristic aid and not a method of acquiring knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, Popper connects these claims for a distinctive treatment of human action with the pro-naturalistic doctrine of historical trends and historicist prophecy, in arguing that anti-naturalistic historicism is logically connected with pro-naturalistic historicism, and then, by implication, rejects these claims on the grounds of their alleged associations.

But if the anti-naturalistic case for the distinctiveness of human action means that social phenomena are intrinsically novel, as is implied

1. PH, 20-23.

in what Popper says about its claims for the impossibility of "real repetition" in history because of interference from human consciousness, then the anti-naturalistic position is incompatible with the two steps by which Popper derives the machinery for historicist prophecy: the limitation of social uniformities and of corresponding generalizations to historical periods, and the theoretical possibility, not incompatible with the previous step, that the only laws valid throughout history are developmental laws, linking periods.

If the historicist holds, as Popper alleges, that each new period of history is "intrinsically" different from any other, which is tantamount to saying that historical periods are unique,<sup>1</sup> then the

"laws of historical development which determine the transition from one period to another" 2.

and which are

"the only universally valid laws of society" 3.

must relate to unique configurations, namely, intrinsically different periods.

If historical periods are unique, as the anti-naturalistic historicist alleges, then this would seem to preclude developmental laws which would determine the emergence of such unique periods. The superiority of such developmental laws over restricted generalizations, based on limited uniformities, is supposed to be that these developmental laws are valid throughout history. The customary notion of a universally valid law is that it states what will happen in all cases of a specified sort; the historicist's universally valid developmental law must, by assumption, state what will happen in what can only be a singular instance.

But perhaps such developmental laws are meant to be closer to the paradigm of Marxian historical laws, which state that in the history of any society, the same sequence of epochs, feudal, capitalist and communist will inexorably occur, with social uniformities and the corresponding laws restricted to each such epoch. To reconcile the uniqueness of historical

1. PH, p. 10.

2. PH, p. 41.

3. PH, p. 41.

epochs with overarching developmental laws, it might be claimed, although rather implausibly, that each instance of such epochs will be intrinsically different from all other instances of the same general type. But here the anti-naturalistic historicist can argue that his premises have not committed him to accepting such a view; rather, on the contrary, they command him to reject it.

The anti-naturalist can maintain, consistent with his premises, that insofar as any historical period is intrinsically novel, it cannot be assimilated to any typology. Because historical periods as well as all social phenomena are intrinsically novel, on the anti-naturalistic premises, each such period is unique. Hence a statement about the emergence of such periods cannot have the generality of a law; for if it is to describe the emergence of a novel period in respect of its novelty, it cannot apply to more than one such period.

In addition, since historical periods are authentically novel, they cannot be forecast in advance of their emergence. For to say that a phenomenon is intrinsically novel is to say that it could not have been predicted, and it is incompatible with the intrinsic novelty of such a phenomenon to say that it could have been predicted in advance of its occurrence.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as prevision of historical periods is possible, it must overlook their novelty. The pro-naturalist has not shown how it is possible to predict intrinsically novel historical periods, for to do so would be contradictory.

There can be no universally valid developmental laws determining the emergence of authentically novel historical periods, for such laws cannot be universally valid in any usual sense, if the emergent periods are authentically novel and thus unique. Nor can the emergence of these novel periods

1. Popper does not say that the pro-naturalistic historicist claims the "sweep and the significance" (PH, p. 37) of his long-term forecasts is that they predict intrinsically novel historical periods. To say this would lay bare the difficulty in Popper's connection of anti-naturalistic historicism with pro-naturalistic historicism.



be governed by any laws, for such laws would make it possible to predict the emergence of such periods in advance of their occurrence, and novelty cannot be predicted and remain authentic novelty. If there were developmental laws which governed the transition to intrinsically novel historical periods, but did not determine the intrinsic novelty of these periods, then there would be the problem of the way in which the intrinsic novelty of historical periods is characteristic of them. It would be disregarded in predictions of these periods by developmental laws, which would imply that it is not intrinsic to the periods. To be sure, what is novel about such historical periods need not be novel in all aspects; for then history would be a series of apocalypses. But if the pro-naturalist is to predict historical periods as delineated by anti-naturalistic historicism, my contention is that such predictions will not be of much use unless they can predict the intrinsic novelty of such periods, and it has been argued that novelty cannot be predicted, for if it could be, it would not then be novel.

If historical periods are governed by developmental laws, then their novelty turns out to be spurious and not intrinsic. Truly novel historical periods thus preclude analysis by developmental laws. The anti-naturalistic historicist, in insisting on the intrinsic novelty of each and every historical period, waives all developmental laws governing their emergence, as well as denying the possibility of any significant social uniformities within periods.

Thus the anti-naturalistic historicist is faithful to his premises in rejecting the developmental laws proposed by the pro-naturalistic historicist, on the grounds that such laws are incompatible with the characterization of social and historical phenomena given by the anti-naturalist. Popper does not supply any actual instance of the combination of pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism in the doctrine of historical trends,<sup>1</sup> nor could he find any such example that could not be convicted of inconsistency for holding that the emergence of intrinsically novel historical periods is

1. Cf. below, sec. IV.

governed by developmental laws. Anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic historicism are incompatible; they do not form a coherent set of doctrines.

This point may be reinforced by the example of Rickert, a theoretician of Historismus whose ideas on the distinctive features of historical conceptualization are a more nuanced presentation of some of the ideas which Popper attributes to anti-naturalistic historicism. Rickert held that laws of all kinds, employed in the scientific approach, required abstracting from the concrete individuality of phenomena; a generalizing procedure was, he thought, antithetical to historical conceptualization, which attended to the particular, the unique, the individual.<sup>1</sup>

"Historical evolution means not simply motion, nor change, but a change which is unique and is important on account of its uniqueness...A change that is historical must not only be unique, one that has never appeared before and can never appear again in our world, but it must be important on account of its newness." 2.

Although Rickert thought it possible to consider social phenomena from a generalizing, or "natural science point of view", and thus

"to formulate the laws of social evolution these laws are not historical laws. An historical law, a law of what happened once and cannot happen again, is a contradictio in adjecto." 3.

The crux of Rickert's argument is that because historical phenomena are conceived as unique individuals, generalization, required for formulating laws, is precluded. Thus by a slightly different argument than that outlined above, a representative of the Historismus, which Popper has acknowledged as an instance of anti-naturalistic historicism, denies that these views commit him to a belief in developmental laws and asserts that these same views are indeed incompatible with such laws.

1. H. Rickert, Science and History (1962)

2. F.M. Fling, "Historical Synthesis", American Historical Review v.9 (no.1) (October, 1903) p. 17. This essay presents Rickert's Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung to an American audience.

3. Fling, op. cit, p. 20.

The anti-naturalistic historicist might consistently continue his criticism of the pro-naturalistic doctrines, to which Popper claims he is logically committed, by saying that the pro-naturalistic historicist proceeds overly generally, overlooking specific contentions upheld by the anti-naturalist, to the detriment of the case for developmental laws in history. The pro-naturalist makes statements which are acceptable only hypothetically, and then proceeds as if these statements were established categorically. For instance, the anti-naturalist has exhibited grounds for thinking that social predictions cannot be precise, because of their repercussions, actual and potential. The pro-naturalist has only asserted that, over the long run, the inaccuracy of such predictions, which he describes more favourably as vagueness, can be compensated by their significance. Such a notion of compensation begs questions: the case for the significance of vague, or inexact, social predictions rests on the claim that the emergence of historical periods is governed by developmental laws. But this latter contention is only a theoretical possibility, compatible with the claim that social uniformities and corresponding laws are of restricted scope, but incompatible with the intrinsic novelty which the anti-naturalist attributes to historical phenomena in general, and historical periods in particular.

The weak link in Popper's concatenation of pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism is that the assertion that all significant social uniformities are confined to historical periods gives no grounds for thinking that overarching developmental laws, linking periods, exist. All Popper's argument shows is that such developmental laws are not in principle incompatible with restricted uniformities; he does not establish that one is committed to a belief in the existence of such laws through asserting that all significant social uniformities are restricted to periods. The claim for restricted uniformities implies that developmental laws linking periods are possible in principle, but it gives no grounds for thinking such laws do in fact exist. The connection of pro-naturalistic historicism with the starting point of anti-naturalistic historicism is not "close-knit"; there is no bond.



The theoretical possibility of such developmental laws, valid throughout history, while it may be in principle compatible with social uniformities restricted to historical periods, is incompatible with the amplification of the anti-naturalistic position which Popper presents. This latter position, as has been argued, conflicts as well with claims for the existence of significant social uniformities, whether restricted to periods or not.

Popper does not reconcile the central historicist claim for trends or developmental laws, with the anti-naturalistic contentions, nor can he do so. His case for linking anti-naturalistic historicism with the pro-naturalistic doctrines falls apart; it rests on the rather weak basis of compatibility with, not derivation from, restricted uniformities: compatibility, that is, with a doctrine which is itself incompatible with the body of anti-naturalistic ideas. Popper has not established a bond between the anti-naturalistic doctrines related to Historismus, and the not altogether convincing steps by which he obtains the machinery of developmental laws for prophecy. If the collection of doctrines which Popper calls historicism are mutually inconsistent, it is difficult to see how it can be thought convenient or useful to cover them by a common name.

What may occur in the formation of Popper's ideas on historicism is that two aspects of his thought are juxtaposed: Popper's criticism of Historismus may be similar, if not related to an objection raised by the Vienna Circle to certain ideas current in German philosophy. Contemporary German philosophy then took for granted a radical distinction between historical knowledge and scientific knowledge, the plausibility of which was largely due to its support by Historismus; the Vienna Circle stood for the unity of all knowledge in science. Popper conflates this point of agreement with the Vienna Circle with certain other doctrines that he thinks constitute discreditable uses of history: large-scale social planning, historical prophecy, and Nazism. Why Popper should think these lines of thought related is considered in the next section but one, on "Popper's historicism and his Liberalism".

## IV. Hegel and Marx as Historicists.

The preceding discussion, in concentrating on Popper's analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism, has neglected his supplementary study of historicism, The Open Society and its Enemies, a book based on Popper's collection of "material to illustrate (the) development of historicism," which he wrote to drive home the dangers of the "habit of historical prophecy."<sup>1</sup> Popper intended his two studies of historicism, which are in different modes, to be complementary, but there are some considerable contrasts in Popper's presentation of historicism in these two books. In The Poverty of Historicism Popper presented historicism as a "close-knit philosophy"<sup>2</sup> - a claim which has been disputed, in the preceding pages. In The Open Society, Popper describes historicism as "a loosely connected set of ideas".<sup>3</sup> It seems difficult to account for this difference in Popper's characterizations of historicism solely in terms of the different genres of these books. Popper's claim of "something like scientific status"<sup>4</sup> for his analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism has been considered above.<sup>5</sup> He makes no such claims for his approach to historicism in The Open Society:

"it cannot give more than a personal point of view".<sup>6</sup>

That is, it is a historical interpretation, as Popper understands this notion.<sup>7</sup>

Popper's historical interpretation of historicism centers on an examination of the ideas of certain intellectual heroes of Western civilization whom he thinks must be exposed as arch-historicists: chief among these are Plato, Hegel and Marx.<sup>8</sup> The accuracy of Popper's presentation of Plato and Hegel has been

1. OS, I, 3; Os, I, 4.      2. PH, p. 3.      3. OS, I, 8.      4. OS, I, 3.

5. Cf. above, p.3-4      6. OS, I, 3.

7. Cf. chapter 25 OS, discussed in Chapter Five, below.

8. Marx's ideas, in Popper's view, are not always historicist (cf. below p.<sup>185</sup> 37), but he fathered the Marxist method which Popper considers to be the "purest historicism". OS, II, 84.

disputed;<sup>1</sup> and the justice of Popper's characterization of Plato as a historicist has also been criticized.<sup>2</sup> In this section I shall consider whether Popper's analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism, into pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic components, fits the two figures whom he considers to be the founding fathers of modern historicism, Hegel and Marx. The problem is whether their respective ideas on history do in fact combine "both kinds of doctrines."<sup>3</sup>

Hegel, as is well-known, denied that he had any intent to predict the future; philosophy could not shed light on history beyond the present. If Hegel renounced what Popper considers to be central to historicism, historical prophecy, was this because Hegel was blind to the commitments in which his philosophy of history involved him? If Hegel subscribed to some, but not all, of the doctrines which Popper allocates to anti-naturalistic historicism, Popper, as we have seen, might argue that this is no barrier to Hegel's being committed to full-blown historicism, for Popper claims to have filled in the lacunae in the historicist methodology.<sup>4</sup> But if Hegel's approach to the philosophy of history does not commit him to historicist prophecy, as I shall argue, then Popper's reasons for classifying Hegel as a historicist need to be examined. I shall argue that Popper considers Hegel to be a historicist on account of the latter's "holism": which turns

1. Ronald B. Levison, In Defence of Plato; Richard Robinson, "Dr. Popper's Defence of Democracy", Philosophical Review, v.60(1951), 487-507; Walter Kaufmann, "The Hegel Myth and its Method", Philosophical Review, v. 60(1951) 459-86, revised and enlarged version in The Owl and the Nightingale (London, 1960; a British edition of From Shakespeare to Existentialism, Boston, 1959) chapters vii-viii.

Popper has also recently been accused of misrepresenting Marx as well, by Maurice Cornforth, in The Open Philosophy and the Open Society, a Reply to Dr. Karl Popper's Refutations of Marxism (London, 1968), but I think that Cornforth's presentation of Marx is also open to question on some points.

2. W.H. Walsh, "Plato and the Philosophy of History: History and Theory in the Republic", History and Theory, II(1962), 3-16.

3. PH, p. 3.

4. PH, p. 3.



out to be a view of individuals and their relationships with social entities which Popper rejects in the name of methodological individualism.

Hegel held that the methods of the natural sciences were not adequate for the philosophical investigation of history. Hegel's methodological views are professedly anti-naturalistic in Popper's sense; his methodology includes some, but not all of the doctrines that Popper considers in his elaboration of anti-naturalistic historicism. In Hegel's view, the salient characteristics of each epoch are peculiar to it, so that there could be no significant social uniformities valid throughout history. Furthermore, Hegel held that the significance of any particular event derived from the historical processes of which it was part, so that Hegel's approach seems to exemplify what Popper describes as the "third variant of the method of intuitive understanding", that

"...to understand the meaning or significance of a social event, more is required than an analysis of its genesis, effects, and situational value. Over and above such analysis, it is necessary to analyse objective, underlying historical trends and tendencies...prevailing at the period in question, and to analyse the contribution of the event in question to the historical process by which such trends become manifest". 1.

But Hegel was a stern critic of intuitionist views, and he also held that understanding was inferior to reason: understanding might suffice for the natural sciences, but the philosophical investigation of history required reason. Consequently Popper's name for this doctrine seems peculiarly inappropriate as a description of Hegel's views; it might be said that Hegel thought that the philosophy of history pursued the ends of the third variant of intuitive understanding, but could not do so by means of understanding, and did not require intuitive means of apprehension to do so.

Lastly, Hegel held that social collectives were something more than "mere aggregates of persons", and that social entities manifested themselves in historical development. Hegel, then, was a holist and rejected what Popper calls methodological nominalism and methodological individualism as inadequate for the philosophical investigation of history.

1. PH, p.22.

2. PH, p.17.

Hegel's philosophical position, then was anti-naturalistic. As he subscribed to the view that history develops in specifiable ways, he was a historicist as well. Was he then committed to pro-naturalistic historicism, and more specifically, to the doctrine which he denied that he held, of historical prophecy? For Hegel, the significance of events is to be determined by considering their place in historical developments; his approach might be described, in later terminology, as one of colligation.<sup>1</sup> But Hegel did not think it was possible to predict the future by extrapolating the developments which he discerned in past events, even though he did think that such developments constituted objective patterns of history; Hegel held what Popper considers to be a historicist view of historical interpretations.<sup>2</sup> that they could reveal the objective "meaning" of history.

It might be argued that Hegel's various statements about historical necessity committed him to historicist prophecy, despite his denials. But if Hegel held that past events had to happen as they did, he is still not, as he says, committed to the belief that he knows what will happen in the future. Moreover, it has been suggested that "contingency...bulks large in [Hegel's] account" of history.<sup>3</sup> A case has been made for Hegel's description of historical events as necessary as being, in some important cases, "non-deterministic". The rise of Caesar was not, in Hegel's view, necessary in the sense of being predictable, although the collapse of the Roman Republic was, "conditions being what they were":

"But would the state be saved? Only if there was a Caesar to do what was required - and if he would do it. What was required was, of course, 'necessary'; but only in the sense of being necessary for the salvation of the state - and for the continued development of history in the direction of increasing freedom. The latter is something which, in Hegel's account, is never guaranteed." 4.

1. A term applied to historiography by W.H. Walsh, in Philosophy of History: an Introduction (London, 1951, 1958), and modified and improved in W.H. Walsh, "Colligatory Concepts in History", Studies in the Nature and Teaching of History, ed. W.H. Burston and D. Thompson (London, 1967)

2. OS, II, 269 (chapter 25, sec. iii)

3. W.H. Dray, Philosophy of History (Prentice-Hall, Englewood-Cliffs, N.J. 1964), p. 74.

4. Dray, op. cit., p.75.

It has been suggested above<sup>1</sup> that a historian might argue that the Roman Republic could not survive on the basis of a situational analysis; thus Hegel's interpretation in this case does not go beyond what a historian is licensed to assert, on the basis of a situational analysis of the evidence.

A case for Hegel's view of history as deterministic and for his being a historical prophet, despite his denials, is at best open to question. Although Hegel subscribed to something of the anti-naturalistic position - sufficient to have helped to foster the development of Historismus - he was not committed to historicist prophecy by means of the machinery of pro-naturalistic historicism.

Why, then, does Popper maintain that Hegel was a historicist, when Hegel could and did disavow that his philosophy of history committed him to predicting the future? Popper does not make the best of cases for his claim, in his chapter on Hegel in The Open Society. He gives most space to expressing his mistaken belief that Hegel's views were politically motivated.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hegel could reject historicist prophecy, which Popper considers the culmination of historicism, Hegel was a historicist in a sense that Popper finds objectionable, in that Hegel held that history develops in specifiable ways. The pattern which Hegel thought was to be found in the past was the development of the consciousness of freedom. Hegel held that world-historical individuals were able to act in accordance with the salient developments of their time: that they had practical knowledge of how history was developing. It is because Hegel thought history had a meaning in the supra-individual process of the development of the consciousness of freedom that Popper can consider him to be a historicist.

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1. Chapter Three, p. 42-44

2. Chapter 12, OS, "Hegel and the New Tribalism", passim, OS, II, 26-80. That Popper misrepresented Hegel has been shown by Kaufmann, op. cit. Popper, in answer to the critics of his chapter on Hegel, has argued that his "attitude" to Hegel's philosophy rests on his appraisal of its contribution to "totalitarian modes of thought". (OS, II, 393-5).



The crux of Popper's objections to Hegel as a historicist lies, I think, in the latter's ethical theories and the conception of the individual which these involve: that the individual is not self-contained, as Popper insists, but is shaped by his participation in various social "wholes" or collective entities of the society in which he is a member. The opposition between these two views of the individual, that of Popper, and that of Hegel, further developed by Bradley, is fundamental to Popper's critique of historicism.<sup>1</sup> Hegel held that actions which are to be appraised in moral terms must be viewed as performed by individuals within a particular social context: individuals have certain duties because of their social positions and relations, and a moral appraisal of their actions must start from these considerations. Hegel developed and illustrated his contention that different societies have distinctive institutions, so that what would be a morally appropriate action in the circumstances of someone in one society would not be so in the circumstances of another society. Hegel's views are incompatible with Popper's insistence that "we" can work on our social situation, whatever it is, so as to bring about the "open society". It is because Hegel is a holist, to use Poppers catchwords, which do not convey Hegel's views altogether satisfactorily, that Popper considers him to have been a historicist; for Hegel was not a historicist in the sense of being committed to the combination of anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines which Popper presents as the fully-developed historicist methodology in The Poverty of Historicism.

Marx, by contrast with Hegel's anti-naturalistic views, held that his method was naturalistic, and thought that he could make valid historical predictions. Popper does not condemn Marx's methodology out of hand. Although some of Marx's ideas were developed into that "purest historicism...Marxist method"<sup>2</sup>, others can be salvaged: Marx's use of situational logic and of the notion of unintended consequences are, according to Popper, independent of his historicism. The bearing of Marx's ideas on Popper's analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism is the following: insofar as Marx claimed his naturalistic method could yield historical predictions, did this

1. Cf. below, Chapter Six.

2. OS, II, 84.

claim, which Popper considers to be characteristic of pro-naturalistic historicism presuppose, as Popper argues it does,<sup>1</sup> the anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism? Did Marx's naturalistic method conceal his commitment to the anti-naturalistic methodology of historicism?

Marx subscribed to the doctrine which Popper uses to introduce his discussion of anti-naturalistic historicism: that there are no significant social uniformities valid throughout history. The iron law of capitalism was limited to the epoch of capitalism and would be annulled by the coming of a new epoch. But Marx would not have thought that this doctrine committed him to an anti-naturalistic view of historical method; nor did it commit him to the anti-naturalistic methodology that Popper delineates, for, as has been argued above,<sup>2</sup> a case for limited social uniformities is incompatible with the full-fledged doctrine of the intrinsic novelty of social phenomena and the associated doctrine that such unique phenomena can only be apprehended by intuitive understanding.

Although Marx thought that a developmental approach was required to grasp the significance of particular historical events, and in this sense held a view resembling what Popper calls the third variant of intuitive understanding,<sup>3</sup> he did not think that his approach involved intuitive understanding: he maintained that his developmental approach to history rested on an objective basis, of economic conditions which could be scientifically investigated.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as anti-naturalistic historicism revolves about the view that unique historical phenomena must be apprehended by intuitive means, this view is foreign to Marx's ideas on historical method.

Marx held that social collectives were something more than conglo-

1. PH, p. 35-36.

2. Cf. above pp. ~~174~~ 179-177

3. Cf. above p. 152 with respect to Hegel.

4. Consideration of Hegel's and Marx's ideas, in relation to what Popper calls the third variant of intuitive understanding, suggests that Popper conflates several ideas under this heading, not all of which need involve intuitive means of apprehension.

merates of individuals, and in this respect he may be thought to be a holist but he would have denied that intuitive understanding, gained through historical study, was required to apprehend the essences of such social collectives. The nature of social collectives could, in Marx's view, be determined by historical investigation of objective conditions.

It is, then, impossible to extract the fundamental anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism from Marx's ideas on the method appropriate to historical study. Marx, no more than Hegel, exemplifies Popper's analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism. The reasons for Popper considering some of Marx's leading ideas to be historicist are evident: Marx held that there were developmental laws of history, and that it was possible to predict the future from the analysis he recommended of historical events. Insofar as Marx claimed to be a historical prophet, he was a historicist in what is the central reference of Popper's usage of this term. Moreover, like Hegel, he held that individuals are not self-contained, but are shaped by their participation in social processes. These contrasting views of the individual are, as has been said, fundamental to Popper's critique of historicism. But Marx cannot be convicted of having presupposed the anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism in his claims to predict the future by means of a naturalistic method of historical investigation. Popper's analysis of the "subtle" "logic" of the "intellectual structure" of historicism<sup>1</sup> does not apply to his two chief examples of historicist thought, and an investigation of why it does not apply has suggested some of the reasons for Popper's connection of a variety of incompatible doctrines in his critique of historicism.

1. PH, "Preface", vii.



## V. Popper's Historicism and his Liberalism

It was argued above that historicism binds together various strands in Popper's ideas on history and the social sciences. However, under logical examination the specious coherence of historicism dissolved into a conglomerate of disparate, and in some respects, incompatible doctrines. An extended case for distinctive methods in history and the social sciences, resting on alleged requirements for the study of human action, maintains that the intrinsic novelty, or uniqueness, of social phenomena, due to their being human phenomena, precludes laws either about regularities or developments in social life. Popper claims that the various lines of historicist thought are interwoven in the doctrine of historical trends, but the derivation he proposes for this doctrine does not support his claim, but only the markedly weaker assertion that developmental laws or historical trends are not incompatible with social uniformities of restricted validity; and adherence to the latter does not entail the former.

Logically, historicism falls apart into at least three sets of ideas. First, <sup>the</sup> the anti-naturalistic case for a distinctive approach to social phenomena, because they involve human action and are consequently unique. Second, the claim which, if it is not vacuous, is incompatible with the preceding: that there are no significant social uniformities which are not restricted to historical periods. The last point, that there are developmental laws which determine the transitions between historical periods, is only compatible with, but is not entailed by the second claim, about the limitation of significant social uniformities to historical periods, and is incompatible with the first claim, of the novelty or uniqueness of social phenomena. That social uniformities are limited in validity to historical periods implies that if social laws of universal validity exist, then they are developmental laws, determining the transitions between historical periods, but it does not imply that social laws of universal validity exist. It is possible to hold that all significant social uniformities, and corresponding generalizations, are restricted to periods, and also to hold that there are no universally valid

social laws; the claim for developmental laws is not incumbent upon the adherent of restricted uniformities - it is, rather, optional.

The logical fission of historicism would seem to impair its usefulness as a colligation of Popper's thought. If historicism is not to prove a red herring in analyzing Popper's ideas on history and the social sciences, then we must investigate for alogical connections between the various historicist doctrines, which may serve to correlate, under the rubric of historicism, what Popper criticizes and what he advocates.

The purport of Popper's critique of historicism may be elicited through a comparison with the approach of the arch-historicist in The Poverty of Historicism, Popper's late colleague at LSE, Karl Mannheim. Although Popper and Mannheim recommend antithetical social philosophies, their arguments are isomorphic. In their works, stimulated by the second World War and the circumstances that had led up to it, both were concerned with the threat of totalitarianism, especially from Nazi Germany. Mannheim argued that the weakness of liberalism in its lack of social planning conduced to totalitarianism; the emergence of a totalitarian state in Germany attested to this tragic flaw of liberalism; such disasters could be prevented only by replacing the laissez-faire society of the liberal ideal by democratic, large-scale planning. Thus Mannheim recommended large-scale planning as an antidote to totalitarianism.

In Popper's argument, the error and its restitution are reversely identified. For Popper, the danger of large-scale planning is that it invites totalitarianism; thus he recommends liberalism with its safeguards against overreaching social policies. Collectivist planning is then for Popper the slippery road to totalitarianism; classical liberalism, with its respect for the integrity of the individual, the only defence against the dangers augured by Nazi Germany: of society going back to the cage, as Popper sometimes says.

Popper's defence of liberalism supplies what logic cannot: Popper's grounds for colligating a variety of doctrines, at odds with liberalism, as historicism, or the intellectual preconditions of totalitarianism.

There is some reason to think that what Popper offers is not terribly useful as an analysis of these ideas. The political propositions associated with some of the various historicist doctrines may exhibit a degree of congruity, but the more disengaged propositions of the several historicisms are in conflict. That is, Historismus, to which Popper's anti-naturalistic historicism refers, may agree with large-scale planning in being collectivist: in denying that discrete actions of individuals can achieve the optimum of social welfare. But the underpinning which Popper ascribes to large-scale planning, namely developmental laws, and the arguments for the distinctive method of history, resting on the intrinsic novelty or uniqueness of human particulars, are logically incompatible.

Popper's analysis of historicism is shaped by his liberal point of view for the same reasons as it is isomorphic to Mannheim's analysis of Nazism. Hitler's Third Reich, says Popper, has laid bare the logical consequences of the system of ideas that he calls historicism: namely claims for the feasibility of large-scale planning, on the grounds that its results can be foreseen by means of prophecies from developmental laws; claims which Popper links under historicism with a collection of arguments alleging that the methods for obtaining historical knowledge are unlike those of the natural sciences. Attempts to undermine or to replace classical liberalism by arguments from the historicist armoury have been revealed by the horrendous events of Nazism for what they are: fallacies of immense political and social consequence. Recent experience, argues Popper, has given the lie to those political doctrines alleged to supersede classical liberalism. Classical liberalism, renovated by means of analogies from the methods of physics,<sup>1</sup> is a more than adequate guide in social and political matters of contemporary life, as well as supplying an answer to the associated question of the methodology appropriate to the social sciences.

1. Herbert Marcuse ("The Problem of Historical Laws", Partisan Review, 26(1959) pp.117-129, especially 126-9) makes much of Popper's PH as a restatement of "some of the philosophical foundations of classical liberalism" on a methodological plane. I think it can be argued that Popper's references to scientific method in this connexion are meant to renovate liberalism.



A defence of such a restatement of liberalism underlies Popper's presentation of historicism as well as his critique thereof. In the last chapter, on holisms and individualisms, I shall argue that Popper's liberalism affects the very categories in which he considers matters of social policy; there I shall contend that Popper's various statements and analyses of holism can only be appreciated as complementary to his individualisms, political, methodological and ontological; and that there are serious defects in the methodological individualism which Popper presents as a self-evident truth,<sup>1</sup> deficiencies which are due to Popper's liberalism.

Popper's analysis of historicism is intended to support liberalism by demonstrating that collectivist planning is logically impossible as well as politically unworkable; that rejection of the premises of classical liberalism leads to blind alleys, not thoroughfares to the future. But Popper's analysis of historicism encompasses far more than large-scale planning. What Popper calls anti-naturalistic historicism, and relates to the underpinning of collectivist planning as premises to conclusions, is, as I have argued, closely connected with Historismus or "the German Idea of History" as it has recently been described.<sup>2</sup>

Historismus, as has recently been argued, was not a disembodied

"theory of historical cognition or development.  
From the beginning it involved certain definite  
assumptions regarding the nature of political  
society." <sup>3</sup>.

Popper's analysis of historicism is an attempt to link the intellectual structure of Historismus with the intellectual basis for large-scale social planning; but this will not do because there are serious dissonances between the two sets of ideas. The aspect of Historismus which is consonant with "holistic" planning are the arguments the former supports for holding that classical liberalism is sadly inadequate in matters of political and social policy. If, in accordance with Historismus, supra-individual social entities are considered to be of real consequence in social life,<sup>4</sup> then the

1. PH, p. 157.

2. Iggers, op. cit. p. 289

3. Iggers, op. cit. p. 327.

4. An application of "holism" as Popper characterizes it PH, 17-19 under anti-naturalistic historicism, which is not quite identical with what he criticizes as holism, PH 73-92.

claim of liberalism that the discrete actions of autonomous individuals are the best assurance of social welfare must seem misconceived. But this need not be totalitarianism or Nazism in ovo. Moreover, the political collectivism of Historismus does not involve what I have argued is central to Historismus as a claim that the methods of history and the social sciences are distinct from those of the natural sciences: namely that social phenomena are intrinsically novel, or equivalently, unique, because they involve the mental<sup>1</sup> life of human beings.

Thus Popper's association of Historismus with large-scale planning, as preconditions of totalitarianism, indicates that Popper is concerned with the political aspects of Historismus rather than with the grounds for its claim that the methods of history and the social sciences are distinctive. The difficulty in Popper's connection of Historismus with historicist prophecy supports this interpretation, that Popper's concerns are political rather than methodological: for the connection Popper proposed is incompatible with the doctrine of the intrinsic novelty of social phenomena which, I have argued, is central to the case for distinctive methods. The methodological debate is not altogether aligned with the political cast of Popper's criticism of historicism.

Popper's critique of historicism may thus be described as ideological, in accordance with a recent characterization of this term: Popper's concern is with "beliefs of political import about social institutions",<sup>2</sup> to which methodological issues take second place. Popper, to be sure, argues in a line reminiscent of Marx's symbiosis of theory and practice that

1. There are difficulties associated with the word "mental", but it is also difficult to state the claims of Historismus without some such word, unless one uses the term human action which in this context is also controversial.

2. Braybrooke, "Ideology," Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (N.Y., 1967) IV 127.

"The locus of ideology lies in beliefs of political import about social institutions."

"the more fruitful debates on method are always inspired by certain practical problems which face the research worker..." 1.

that methodology, without the "incentive" of practical problems, is scholastic in the pejorative sense.

Popper's point is acceptable only insofar as commitments on practical issues do not introduce theoretical errors - mistakes, in other words, of an ideological nature - and this is, as I have argued, one significant effect of Popper's liberal beliefs on his analysis of historicism.

Popper has contrasted the genre of The Poverty of Historicism with that of his other discussion of historicism, The Open Society and its Enemies.

"The systematic analysis of historicism as in The Poverty of Historicism

"aims at something like scientific status".<sup>2</sup>

The Open Society, is a compendium of

"material to illustrate [the] development"

of historicism, represents "a personal point of view," and does not "pretend to be scientific".<sup>3</sup> If we adopt the views on historical interpretations which Popper expresses in the last chapter of The Open Society, then the distinction of status which Popper draws between his two different treatments of historicism dissolves. Popper's allegedly scientific analysis of historicism in The Poverty of Historicism depends as much on "a personal point of view" as does his historical illustration of the development of historicism in The Open Society. Inaccessibility to intersubjective testing and dependence on a point of view are what make historical interpretations inadmissible to scientific knowledge. Thus, in The Poverty of Historicism, the connections which Popper alleges hold between the various aspects of historicism are not logical but ideological, for some of the key doctrines which Popper associates are incompatible. The connections derive, as I have argued, from Popper's

1. Popper, PH, p.57, cf. 55-58, also OS, II, 222 end of chap. 23.

"Practice is not the enemy of theoretical knowledge but the most valuable incentive to it".

2. OS, I, 3

3. OS, I, 3.



defence of liberalism and are not inter-subjectively testable or objectively valid. The claims of scientific status for The Poverty of Historicism must be rejected. If it is not a piece of ideology, it is an attempted historical interpretation, in the form of an abstract analysis of the rise of Nazism.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as the lack of anything like Western Liberalism is held to have contributed to the rise of Nazism, and insofar as Historicism is implicated in the lack of such a liberalism<sup>2</sup>, then Historicism may be considered to be an intellectual precondition of Nazism. If this is Popper's position, that a lack of authentic liberalism in Germany, due to the prevalence of Historicism and associated collectivist ideas of social policy, explains the rise of Nazism, then he has stated his argument rather obscurely. But Popper's<sup>3</sup> rather abstractly formulated interpretation of the rise of Nazism, *if it is fair to describe what he is doing in these terms*, is certainly seriously incomplete, for it omits social and economic conditions which many historians would consider to be crucial; it explains the rise of Nazism purely in terms of the consequences of ideas. Popper's interpretation might be thought to over-intellectualize a movement which prided itself on its opportunistic use of ideas.

But there are other limitations to Popper's analysis of historicism which are more germane to our present concerns than its deficiencies as a historical interpretation of Nazism. My concern has been with its weaknesses, not as a historical interpretation, but as a philosophical argument.

1. Or perhaps it is both historiography and ideology at once.
2. See Iggers, op. cit. pp. 327-328, where he makes this point.
3. Popper does not explicitly offer his two books on historicism as such an interpretation, but it is not extravagant to see Popper's works as an implicit interpretation of this kind.

## Chapter Five

## Karl Popper on History

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## I. Introduction

It has recently been suggested that there are, in the main, two "principal motives" for concern with the manifold activities subsumed under the term 'philosophy of history': either the hope of predicting the future from study of the past, or the "desire" to contribute to understanding "the significance of human life".<sup>1</sup> Popper claims to have thoroughly discredited the former, prophetic, motive through his critique of historicism. As for the latter motive, which is moral in a large sense<sup>2</sup>, Popper maintains, in the concluding chapter of The Open Society,<sup>3</sup> that the methodological limitations of historiography preclude any attempt to extract the overall significance of human life from what we can know with respect to the past.

No history of humanity can be written, Popper argues, because there is no archimedean point from which all mankind's past can be considered with a view to appraising its significance. The whole history of mankind is beyond our grasp. Popper denies that any possible synthesis of past records can reveal the overall significance of human life. The use of history along the moral lines of the second suggested motive for philosophy of history is, according to Popper, far more limited: it is restricted to the here-and-now; historiography can be used instrumentally, to cast light on "problems" in the present.

Popper maintains that these radical and sweeping conclusions about the limited scope of historical work are derived from his analysis of historical

1. R.V. Sampson, in a review of Bruce Mazlish, The Riddle of History, in History and Theory, vol.VI, no. 3(1967) pp. 456-458.

2. op. cit., p. 458

3. Chapter 25, "Has History any Meaning?", OS, II, 259-80. Throughout this chapter I cite the fourth edition of The Open Society; there seem to be no changes in this part of the OS. The relevant pages in the first edition of the OS for this chapter are: OS, II, 246-248, sec. i, for the necessity of selection for knowledge, in history as in science; OS, II, 248-252, sec. ii, on Popper's hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation; OS, II, 252-256, sec. iii, for Popper's analysis of the characteristics of historical interpretations; and OS, II, 256-267, sec. iv, where Popper argues from the plurality of possible interpretations that "history has no meaning" in the sense that "a concrete history of mankind" cannot be written.



method by the standards of empirical science. The logical impossibility of writing a history of mankind is a consequence of his argument that, if history is to be written at all, it must be written from a point of view. Popper argues that all knowledge requires a "unifying" organization, in order to select from infinite and chaotic data, and in the case of knowledge about the past, this requirement is fulfilled by the historian implementing a point of view. The points of view which the historian requires are, Popper argues, "preconceived" and in general untestable; I shall examine his grounds for this contention in some detail.<sup>1</sup> What Popper considers to be the untestability of such points of view is of far reaching consequence. The ideal of objectivity is "inapplicable"<sup>2</sup> to the practice of history: a minimum condition for objective knowledge, in Popper's view,<sup>3</sup> is that the organizing conceptions required for knowledge ~~to~~ be testable, and knowledge about the past cannot meet this standard. Consequently, Popper wants historians to realize that the accounts they produce of aspects of the past must be tendentious, because the point of view required to organize such an account will not, in general, be testable, and consequently historical interpretations are for the most part "circular" in the sense that any interpretations must "fit in with" sources which were "collected in accordance with a preconceived point of view".<sup>4</sup>

Such points of view as historians must adopt and implement, if they are to practise history at all, preclude the possibility of any comprehensive or total history of mankind. Although scientists can work with the ideal of approaching though not attaining the truth by thoroughly testing their conjectures, the historian can have no corresponding ideal of contributing to the history of mankind. Thus Popper in effect denies that Collingwood's "idea of history" can serve as a regulative ideal for the historian's work; Popper rests his case on what he maintains are necessary limitations of historical work. The way in which Popper constructs this case is the main topic of this chapter.

1. Below, pp. ~~187~~ 208-220

2. OS, II, 268

3. As presented in Chapter twenty-five, OS; Cf. Chap III, p. ~~106~~ 106-7 above

4. OS, II, 265, 266, 267.

Popper is of course not unique in maintaining that, in order to practise history, one must adopt a point of view. Such claims are the stock-in-trade of historical relativism and the sociology of knowledge. Popper's characterization of the points of view implemented in historiography differs in some important respects from these latter schools of thought.<sup>1</sup> According to Popper, the historian must adopt and implement a "preconceived" point of view in order to write history at all; to make the most of this limitation, the historian should consciously adopt a point of view with a bearing on current social or political problems, to provide the necessary organization for his account of an aspect of the human past. The validity of Popper's conclusions here depends on the validity of the arguments by which they are reached.

If Popper's arguments can be faulted in some respects, as I shall argue, then the points of view required for the practice of history may not be quite as Popper sees them. Popper's characterization of these points of view is, I think, unacceptable. The object of this exercise is to obtain a more accurate characterization of such points of view as historians are obliged in some sense to adopt. I shall not attempt to survey how partisan history comes to be written, but rather, to establish what points of view are like in what passes for good history among its practitioners. Whether points of view or interpretations are requisite for historiography is a question to be distinguished from whether the historian must adopt and implement a "preconceived" point of view, bearing on current problems, in accordance with Popper's prescriptions. The first position does not entail the latter, and conversely, to reject Popper's position as unsound in some respects does not entail denial of the former position.

I shall also consider whether the limitations of historiography, which Popper argues make the "idea of objectivity" "inapplicable",<sup>2</sup> are compatible with Popper's amplification of situational logic as a technique of historical

1. These differences can be more precisely stated after examining Popper's ideas in more detail. See below, pp. ~~223~~ 224-226

2. OS, II, 268.

explanation, in his later writings.<sup>1.</sup> The issue here may be stated briefly. Popper, in his later writings, recommends situational logic to historians as well as to social scientists, because it is objective.<sup>2.</sup> The objectivity of situational logic was not mentioned in either The Open Society or The Poverty of Historicism. If "everything about" situational logic "is, in principle, objectively testable",<sup>3.</sup> and if the historian is to be able to make use of situational logic, then Popper may well be obliged to retract some of the limitations which he argued earlier were inherent in the practice of history; limitations which I shall argue are in any case untenable as they stand.

## II. Popper's Argument for the Circularity of Historical Interpretations

Popper builds up his argument that the historian must adopt and implement a preconceived and untestable point of view, in the practice of history, by several steps. I shall recapitulate the stages of Popper's argument and argue that Popper's conclusion is acceptable as it stands only if Popper's contentions about the uses of historical evidence are tenable.

Popper's contentions as to the necessary limitations on the historian's use of evidence are crucial to his argument, and untenable. Popper obtains his conclusion that the historian must adopt and implement a preconceived point of view by assuming it as a premise in his discussion of historical evidence. Any item of historical evidence is, according to Popper, indelibly permeated by the informant's point of view, a point of view which is in

1. Cf. below, pp. <sup>240-2</sup>~~241~~. Situational logic is discussed above, in Chapter Three.

2. K.R. Popper, "Historical Explanation", an interview with Michael Tanner, John Dunn and Alistair Young, Cambridge Opinion, v. 28(1962), p. 22, hereafter cited as HE; also, "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie 14(1962), pp. 246-7, hereafter cited as LSW.

3. Popper, HE, p. 22.



general untestable. Popper believes that the historian has for the most part no recourse against the conditions under which evidence is presented in historical sources. All subsequent interpretations must "fit in with" the untestable points of view from which information is recorded in historical sources. Popper argues that historical interpretations are in general "circular" on the grounds that the evidence contained in historical sources cannot in general be disentangled from the informant's point of view.

Popper's discussion of historical methods starts from certain epistemological considerations.<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to recapitulate all there is as knowledge. We cannot even know everything about any one particular thing; we can only study aspects of it.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge thus presupposes selection. Such selection cannot be random or haphazard; knowledge requires selection which also serves to organize some of the manifold aspects of the manifold facts. Selection thus requires a point of view to provide the necessary organization. Popper argues that these epistemological considerations, which he introduces with reference to science, apply with equal force but rather different results in the practice of history.<sup>3</sup>

"Some more or less preconceived scientific theory" is the criterion for selection in science, from the "infinite wealth and variety of the possible aspects of the facts of our world".<sup>4</sup> Theories thus provide the organizing points of view for scientific work. A scientist considers those aspects of certain facts which "have a bearing" on that theory with which he is concerned.<sup>5</sup> Popper's imprecise description of scientific theories as "more or less preconceived" needs a gloss. Scientific theories are preconceived in that Popper claims that knowledge of facts is not possible without the selective focus of some theory; Popper rejects as false the "empiricist myth of induction", according to which bare facts can generate theories. Conjecture is presupposed in all knowledge because knowledge requires criteria of selection.

1. chap. 25, sec. I, OS, II, 259, 261.      2. Cf. Popper on holism, PH, p.77.

3. OS, II, 261.

4. OS, II, 261.

5. OS, II, 260.

No theory can be considered scientific, in Popper's view, unless it is possible in principle for the theory to be overthrown or falsified. Popper maintains that, in general, historical evidence does not allow the overthrow of those points of view which the historian requires to organize his selection of historical evidence, with the result that these points of view are preconceived in a rather different and stronger sense than is the case with scientific theories. Scientific theories are preconceived in the sense that they are prior to any knowledge of facts, but the facts which they bring to light may force a rejection or revision of any such "preconceived" scientific theory. Popper holds that the historical interpretations, or points of view, which are required to organize historical facts, are not, for the most part, open to revision through confrontation with evidence in the manner of scientific theories.<sup>1</sup>

Popper's analysis of the logic of historical explanation, in The Poverty of Historicism as in The Open Society, is meant to support this contrast of historiography with science, by showing that insofar as theories are used in historical work, they cannot provide an objective organization for the materials. It is perhaps as much a step in his case for the limitations of historiography as a doctrine in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of Popper's analysis of the logic of historical explanation is twofold. First, to establish that the historian's characteristic concern with specific events does not entitle him to claim that he relies on distinctive methods, set apart from the methods of the natural sciences, in order to apprehend such historical particulars. Popper's criticism is directed at claims for the autonomy of historical method, claims which have been frequently made in connection with the doctrine that historical particulars are apprehended by intuitive understanding. Popper argues that adequate explanations of particular historical events presuppose general statements which are

1. Those relatively rare interpretations which Popper thinks are semi-testable are discussed below, pp. ~~20-22~~ 215-217

2. Cf. above Chapter Two, for a discussion of the various functions which Popper's advocacy of hypothetico-deductive model of explanation serves.

trivial. Thus the unity of scientific method, which consists in the several uses of the hypothetico-deductive apparatus, extends to the historical sciences which, in appearance and in actuality, are concerned with particular events, and not with theories or generalizations, which Popper thinks constitute the crux of the hypothetico-deductive method.

Popper's analysis of the use of laws in historical work is also meant to establish a further point, which is instrumental in his argument that the "idea of objectivity" is "inapplicable" to history, because the conceptions which the historian requires to organize his materials are untestable points of view; the untestability of such organizing conceptions means that there is no way of deciding, other than arbitrarily, on one or another of the plurality of possible interpretations of any given collection of historical evidence. Popper's argument is that insofar as universal laws are used in historical work - for the most part, as tacit presuppositions for adequate explanations of particular events, they cannot provide a focus, or "unifying" point of view, by which to select from the "flood" of "unrelated material" engulfing the historian:<sup>1</sup>.

"...our view explains why, in history, we are confronted much more than in the generalizing sciences, with the problems of its 'infinite subject matter'". 2.

Such trivial laws as the historian tacitly presupposes, for the most part unconsciously, in explaining particular events

"are practically without interest, and totally unable to bring order into the subject matter." 3.

In further support of this point, Popper argues that, in the quest for a unifying point of view,

"the attempt to follow causal chains into the remote past would not help in the least, for every concrete effect with which we might start has a great number of different partial causes; that is to say, initial conditions are very complex, and most of them have little interest for us." 4.

1. PH, p. 150, cf. OS, II, 264.

2. OS, II, 264; the phrase "infinite subject matter" is Schopenhauer's, which Popper had previously cited, OS, II 261.

3. OS, II, 264.

4. PH, p. 150.



Thus such universal laws as the historian uses will not provide a criterion by which he can select from, and organize, the inexhaustible variety of materials about the past.

Thus Popper uses his theory of historical explanation to argue that theories, as used in historical work, will not do the necessary job of organizing the materials, as will the theories used in scientific work:

"We see, therefore, that those universal laws which historical explanation uses [to] provide no selective or unifying principle, no 'point of view' for history. In a very limited sense such a point of view may be provided by confining history to a history of something: examples are the history of power politics, or of economic relations, or of technology, or of mathematics. But as a rule, we need further selective principles, points of view which are at the same time centres of interest." 1.

Popper's exposition of his case here is elliptic. He does not explain why specifying a subject is not in general sufficient to provide a "selective and unifying principle" by which to compose an historical account. He could not claim that some "interest" or "point of view" is necessary in addition to a specified subject matter without begging the question, for this is what he wants to establish.

One possible argument in support of Popper's proposed general rule, which is consistent with what Popper has argued elsewhere, is that the subject of a "history of something" will still possess the troublesome property of an infinite variety of facts and aspects.<sup>2</sup> Thus some criterion in addition to a specification of subject matter is needed in order to compose a finite and organized account of an infinite subject.

Popper maintains that the outcome of his general rule, that a historian must adopt a point of view in order to delimit and organize<sup>3</sup> his materials,

1. OS, II, 265. 2. I refer to Popper's criticism of holism, sec.23, PH, pp.76-78.  
3. Popper's way of speaking of selective principles as unifying an account may not be acceptable to historians who believe that presenting a unified account would misrepresent the variety of the past, which they hope, if not to capture, at least to suggest. It might thus be more accurate to speak of organizing or constructing a coherent historical account, rather than unifying it.

is that such points of view must be "preconceived" in a sense rather different from that in which scientific theories are "more or less preconceived". Not only is adherence to a selective principle or point of view prerequisite to assembling an organized account from the infinite variety of data - the sense in which scientific theories are preconceived - but also, in historiography, Popper claims that such points of view are not in general open to revision in the light of evidence. And it is a conjecture's liability to Herbert Spencer's tragic flaw, of being overthrown by a fact, that constitutes for Popper its testability and empirical character.

The relation of a historical interpretation to the evidence mastered in its support is for the most part "circular"<sup>1</sup>; due to the limitations of historical evidence. Because historical facts

"cannot be repeated or implemented at our will"<sup>2</sup>.

the historian has no redress against the conditions under which traces of the past are preserved, in historical sources. Historical facts

"are often severely limited...and have been collected in accordance with a preconceived point of view; the so-called 'sources' of history only record such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that the sources will, as a rule, contain only facts that fit in with a preconceived theory. And since no further facts are available, it will not, as a rule, be possible to test that or any subsequent theory." <sup>3</sup>.

Popper claims that in general there is no way of escaping the limitations inherent in the historical records that support a given interpretation, limitations which are also the conditions for the very existence of these records, according to this apparent application of Popper's epistemology: namely that the extant facts had some relevance to the point of view held by the witness who recorded them.

1. OS, II, 266, 267.

2. OS, II, 265.

3. OS, II, 265.

## III. General and Specific Interpretations

How points of view are alleged to function in organizing historical accounts needs to be more closely examined. The range of conceptions which can function as points of view, in Popper's eyes, is vast. The variety covered by his usage of the term 'point of view' or the term 'interpretation' is one of the weaknesses in his theory of historiography. Popper assumes that the whole gamut of historical interpretations function in the same way in the relevant respects; but this is not the case. Popper makes sweeping statements about historical interpretations which may apply at one end of the spectrum but not at the other.

Popper gives, as examples of interpretations which are "some" of the selective principles by which historical materials can be organized, such "preconceived ideas" or speculative conceptions as

"what is important for history is the character of the 'Great Men', or the 'national character', or moral ideas, or economic conditions." 1.

Popper's description of the selective principles which such "'general interpretations'" provide suggests that such interpretations are more characteristic of speculative philosophy of history than of the practice of history. Hegel and Marx contended, respectively, that what mattered for history were the "world-historical individuals" or economic conditions, and their philosophies of history seem to provide such selective principles as those to which

1. OS, II, 265; cf. PH, p.151 for more interpretations of this order:

"It is possible, for example, to interpret 'history' as the history of class struggle, or of the struggle of the races for supremacy, or as the history of the struggle between the 'open' and the 'closed' society, or as the history of scientific and industrial progress."

Another such interpretation is the "rationalist interpretation" of history, note 61 to chap. 11(OS,II, 302-3)

I.C. Jarvie (in "Professor Passmore on the Objectivity of History," Philosophy, vol.XXXV, 1960, pp. 335-336) also interprets Popper's notion of historical interpretations along these lines, as can be seen from his examples, which are a selection of those used by Popper, cited above.



Popper refers. If a historian were to write a history of Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century, he might argue either that the character and activities of Bismarck were decisive in the unification of Germany, or that, due to the prevailing economic conditions, Bismarck's activities were superfluous. Such interpretations may appear at first sight to instance the general principles of Hegel and Marx, but they are, I think, logically a different kettle of fish. A historian, in asserting that the actions of a particular individual, or economic conditions, shaped a certain juncture of events, need not make a general statement such as those of Hegel and Marx, and to do so would be to go beyond what the historian's critical examination of the evidence<sup>1</sup> licenses him to assert. A practising historian may formulate the principle by which he marshalls evidence as: in this case the actions of a particular individual, or economic conditions, were decisive. This difference in formulation indicates, as I shall argue, a considerable difference between what Popper calls "'general interpretations'" and interpretations propounded in the practice of history.

On Popper's showing, historical interpretations may range from such grand schemas as these "general interpretations", which Popper compares to scientific theories only to retract the comparison,<sup>2</sup> to "specific hypotheses"

"which, in the explanation of historical events play the role of hypothetical initial conditions rather than universal laws." 3.

Sometimes such hypotheses

"can be tested fairly well and are therefore comparable to scientific theories." 4.

1. That historians can examine evidence critically will be argued below, and the consequences of this activity for the character of historical points of view elicited.

2. OS, II, 265; PH, 151. They are comparable insofar as both scientific theories and historical interpretations organize the respective materials, but dissimilar with respect to testability, which gives a scientific theory its empirical character.

3. OS, II, 266.

4. OS, II, 266.

But sometimes specific historical hypotheses, says Popper, suffer from the same circularity which afflicts the "general interpretations" or "universal 'points of view'" mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> Popper ascribes the circularity, or untestability, of most historical interpretations, to the characteristics of historical evidence.<sup>2</sup> Popper claims that there is in general no way of testing a historical interpretation, because it is based on a severely limited set of facts, the historical sources. An interpretation "must fit in with"<sup>3</sup> the original interpretations present in the sources of the relevant evidence, but the historian cannot test the interpretations given by his sources, because "no further facts are available"<sup>4</sup> beyond these sources. Thus the circularity which Popper attributes to most historical interpretations stems from Popper's claim that a preconceived point of view is required for the original collection of evidence, which is all that the historian has at his disposal.

It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that in giving an overall characterization of interpretations, ranging from "general" to "specific", Popper starts by considering what he calls "general interpretations", which seem to me to represent speculative philosophy of history, and applies his analysis of these to specific interpretations. His approach might be thought to beg the question of whether historical evidence has the same bearing on general and specific interpretations respectively.

In defence of their craft, historians could make two points against Popper's case outlined above. Firstly, the many levels at which historical interpretations function in the practice of history is not adequately described by Popper's schema of general and specific interpretations. Secondly, the way in which evidence is brought to bear on the working historian's interpretations, wherein Popper's specific interpretations may be included, is quite different from the way in which evidence is marshalled to support general interpretations in speculative philosophy of history.

1. OS, II, 266-67.      2. OS, II, 265-7.      3. OS, II, 265.

4. OS, II, 265. Popper often seems to consider the case where a historian relies on a single source as paradigmatic.

#### IV. Criticism of Popper's Views on Historical Interpretations

In arguing that the characteristics of historical evidence make most historical interpretations circular, Popper seems to mix two considerations: the observation that historians cannot arrange for repetitions of those past events which relate to their interpretations, with certain dogmatic contentions to the effect that the evidence contained in any historical source is indissolubly linked with the point of view from which it was collected, contentions which are largely, if not entirely, independent of the comparison with science.

The facts which have a bearing on a given historical interpretation are limited by comparison with the facts relating to a scientific theory; the latter are in principle infinite because of Popper's requirement that a scientific theory be testable, whereas the former are finite, not because the interpretation may not relate to an infinitude of past events, but because the relevant evidence is limited to finite records.

But Popper goes on to impute limitations to historical evidence which preclude any critical approach<sup>1</sup> to historical records. His claims as to these limitations go beyond the observations that repetitions of events or experiments are not possible in historical research, or that historical evidence is limited to the traces left by the past. Popper makes the sweeping assertion that

1. In analysing historical methods, Popper seems to assume that if historical evidence cannot be tested by the methods practicable in the theoretical sciences, then no critical approach to historical evidence is possible. But such testing is only a special case of the critical approach, as Popper says elsewhere: "I have since generalized this formulation of scientific objectivity; for intersubjective testing is merely a very important aspect of the more general idea of intersubjective criticism, or...the idea of mutual rational control by critical discussion." LSD, p.44. Cf. above, Chapter Three, <sup>p. 106-7</sup> for a discussion of Popper's characterizations of scientific objectivity.



"the so-called 'sources' of history...will, as a rule, contain only facts that fit in with a preconceived theory. And since no further facts are available, it will not, as a rule, be possible to test that or any subsequent theory." 1.

Now it is just not the case that historical sources are in general so limited as to provide evidence only from one point of view, for there are often records compiled by several witnesses, perhaps from differing points of view, as to what took place at a given time and location.

It might be argued that Popper allows for this point, for he admits that there are historical hypotheses which can be fairly well tested and are thus comparable to scientific theories in this crucial respect, although he does not say how such testing could be done with the limited materials available to the historian. Moreover, such testable singular hypotheses seem to be descriptions of initial conditions,<sup>2</sup> and neither the laws presupposed in historical explanations, nor the initial conditions can serve to organize historical materials.<sup>3</sup>

Popper claims that the amount of evidence relevant to any given interpretation is of a severely limited quantity. I have argued that this claim confuses two considerations. The historical evidence relevant to a given interpretation is necessarily limited by comparison to the infinite evidence which can be produced by testing, relevant to a scientific theory. But Popper also maintains that the evidence relevant to a particular interpretation is not merely a finite set of records, but also that such evidence is confined by the points of view from which it was originally collected; and Popper seems to believe that the relevant evidence will have been collected from a single point of view, or at most, a few points of view: that historical evidence is not merely finite, but of a low density. While there may be interpretations of the past for which there are only a few sources, e.g. in ancient or medieval history, there are also interpretations for which the relevant evidence is immense; and, in general the amount of historical evidence increases considerably as we approach our own times.

1. OS, II, 265. 2. OS, II, 266, cf. p. 206 above. 3. Cf. p. 202 above.

Popper maintains that, as a consequence of the alleged limitations of the historical evidence for any given interpretation, the evidence must be used literally: it must be taken as it comes from the source's mouth. Popper asserts not only that the points of view of a given historical source cannot be tested, but also that no critical approach<sup>1</sup> to historical evidence is possible, by which the facts contained in a source might be disentangled from the point of view under which they are presented.

But is historical evidence in general limited in the way that Popper claims? There are certainly cases where facts crucial to interpreting accounts of past events are presented from several points of view: as is the case with the question of who fired the first shot in the French revolution of 1848, one of the soldiers of the government, or one of the anti-government crowd? Identifying the incident which triggered off the 1848 revolution is relevant to appraising the character of this revolution in France. It can be argued that this may be done by a critical consideration of the various conflicting reports as to what took place. If Popper admits that this can be done, in this case, he might maintain that this particular instance does not affect his general argument as to the limitations of historical evidence, and classify this instance as a testable historical hypothesis. But I think it can be maintained that this is a case where there is evidence available, recorded from opposed points of view, on an issue crucial to a specific interpretation. Any interpretation of the character of the 1848 revolution in France can be gauged in at least this one respect: the use made of the available evidence as to the events which triggered off the revolution.

Popper's sweeping assertion that the historian cannot, in general, go beyond the interpretations given in the sources available to him rests on several assumptions which I think are false. It requires that for the most part there cannot be assorted records on points of importance to such interpretations as historians propose; and this is just not the case. Often

1. A critical approach is a more general concept than testing, or testing in principle. See LSD p.44 and p.45 of this chapter.

(2 of 2)

historians suffer more from a wealth of source material than from a dearth. Moreover, even if no further sources seem to be available, a historian can criticize limited sources in terms of general plausibility: some evidence is too far-fetched to be reliable - this is one of the techniques which historians use to criticize historical sources which exhibit points of view.

Secondly, Popper's characterization of historical sources in terms of points of view assumes that all the sources available to the historian take the form of testimony, and this again is not the case. Historians can make use of a wide range of documents which are not testimonies, and they can also use, as sources, a wide range of materials which are not written documents: examples of sources in the first category are charters, or parish records; coins or buildings can be sources of the second category, and historians can draw on auxiliary disciplines for extracting information from sources such as these.

Moreover, there is an error still more fundamental than that of mistaking the quantity and character of available historical evidence in Popper's account of the methodological limitations on the historian's use of such evidence. In the extreme case, which Popper seems to consider paradigmatic of the historian's lot, the historian has no information beyond what is contained in a single source, and it is trivially true that he cannot test what his source contains by bringing additional information to bear. From this Popper infers that no critical approach is possible to such a source. Testing a scientific theory involves bringing additional evidence to bear on the theory. Since it is clearly the case that the historian cannot test by this procedure, in the above case, Popper declares that it is not possible to take a critical approach to such a source; the historian must take his source as it is. But the truism that a historian restricted to a single piece of evidence has no more than one piece of evidence at his disposal, does not imply that he is therefore denied a critical approach to his source; for critical approaches are not restricted to testing, in the manner of scientific experiments.

Popper says that there are certain criteria by which the adequacy or



acceptability<sup>1</sup> of any historical interpretation may be appraised, in terms of its coherence with the available evidence: whether it accounts for all the available evidence, without omission and without recourse to ad hoc hypotheses; and whether it provides a more connected or more coherent account of this evidence than any other interpretation which satisfies the preceding standards.<sup>2</sup> But Popper maintains that these criteria only allow the historian to judge the coherence of an interpretation with the available evidence and no more. According to Popper, the historian has no way of breaking the circle: his interpretation must cohere with the original interpretation from which his evidence was presented, a dilemma which is most striking in, if not exclusive to, the instance where the historian must rely on a single source.

Popper has argued that the compilation of records of past events presupposes a criterion for selection from the infinite data which, in any historical source, is supplied by the informant's point of view. But it would be naive to suppose that what an informant relates is always consistent with the point of view that he may wish to convey. There are numerous ways in which such inconsistencies may arise in historical records. Although an informant may implement a point of view in the bulk of his account of certain events, it may be possible to infer from incidental remarks or asides in his testimony that a more accurate account of these events can be constructed which gives the lie to the informant's point of view. Thus, an official account of a riot may assert that the police were provoked by the mob, but imply that the police fired first. Popper's epistemological argument shows

1. I use various forms of these two words to refer to these concepts below, in the sense in which Popper understands them.

2. Popper states these criteria negatively, as excluding interpretations not "of equal merit", i.e. not part of the undecidable plurality of interpretations:

"...there are always interpretations which are not really in keeping with the accepted records; secondly, there are some which need a number of more or less plausible auxiliary hypotheses if they are to escape falsification by the records; next, there are some that are unable to connect a number of facts which another interpretation can connect, and in so far 'explain'." OS, II, 266.

only that some criteria of selection are necessary to compose accounts of past events, not that such criteria of selection must be consistently applied. There is no epistemological, logical or methodological reason why the resultant account must consistently implement any criterion of selection or point of view, and it is the latter contention which is required to make good Popper's case that the historian cannot break the vicious circle of historical evidence compiled from a point of view; Popper's epistemological argument does not entail his methodological conclusions about the limitations of historical work.

Indeed, it can almost be elevated to a general principle that no one historical source will contain only evidence which is consistent with a single point of view on the part of the informant. Indeed, if a source were completely consistent with a single point of view with no evident discrepancies, this might be a *prima facie* reason for suspecting it to be a forgery, composed after the fact in order to propagate just this point of view. Thus the historian's critical use of historical evidence, even of such evidence as is contained in a single source, can start from the various ways in which any point of view may be inconsistently or incompletely implemented.

My argument as to how points of view are incompletely or inconsistently applied in historical sources does not exhaust the resources of historical criticism, nor would I want to attempt to do so in the confines of this section of this chapter. But my argument does, I think, undermine Popper's characterization of historical interpretations as untestable and consequently circular as preconceived in the strong sense. The crucial point in Popper's case is his contention that the circularity of the historian's interpretations derives from the characteristics of the sources on which he must rely; that any interpretation of past records must "fit in with" the interpretations conveyed by the evidence which the original sources contained. As the circularity of viewpoint and facts can be broken, in the case of historical sources, it need not extend to secondary historical work.

Popper's other requirements for acceptable interpretations can also be

modified so as to indicate the ways of critically examining sources: by appraising the character and quantity of ad hoc hypotheses or interpolations which a witness introduces in order to account for the evidence that he presents, from his point of view; and by appraising the degree of organization which his point of view provides for the evidence he presents. If Popper allows that these criteria for adequate interpretations can be applied to appraising points of view in general, surely they can be applied to appraising historical sources in particular. But these latter two techniques are ancillary to the main task of historical criticism, which is to extract some indication of what past events or circumstances were actually like, from inaccurate or misleading witnesses. This task proceeds by reversing Popper's chief contention: on the assumption that the point of view adopted by a witness will not, as a rule, be consistently implemented. That is, criticism of historical sources works from the discrepancies between the evidence presented by a source, and the point of view that its writer wished to convey, discrepancies which the historian's chronological distance from his informant can help him to discern.

The weakness in Popper's argument, that historical points of view can in general neither be tested nor criticized, is that his methodological conclusions about the limitations of historical evidence are not entailed by his epistemological considerations. That is, the observation that criteria of selection are prerequisite to knowledge does not imply that such criteria will be consistently applied in acquiring knowledge. And only if a point of view is consistently implemented in a historical source can the vicious circle of evidence inseparable from an untestable point of view arise, and this case is one where the authenticity of such a source might be questioned, just because of its consistency.

Popper's recommendation to historians that they should consciously adopt and implement points of view, in order to make the best of the limitations under which they must work, cannot be retroactively applied to extant historical sources, from which most history is written.

The principles of historical criticism are in no way affected by the



quantity of sources available to the historian, bearing on a given issue, except that the more sources are available, the vaster the field is for historical criticism, and the greater the temptation is to scamp the job, and to treat convergent sources as authorities.

Although Popper maintains that the vast majority of historical interpretations represent "crystallizations" of "untestable" "points of view" due to the considerations about historical evidence which have been discussed above, he admits one class of exceptions to his general rule that a historical interpretation based on limited sources must be untestable. The character of a historical interpretation based on a single authority may

"take on some semblance to that of a scientific hypothesis"

"If...we can give to such material an interpretation which radically deviates from that adopted by our authority...." 1.

As a case of such a non-circular interpretation, Popper instances his own "interpretation of Plato's work".<sup>2</sup> It is clear what is in Popper's mind here: such "semi-scientific"<sup>3</sup> interpretations deviate from the interpretation provided by the single source in a way that suggests a partial analogy to the falsification of a scientific theory. Popper has been maintaining that the agreement of a historical interpretation with the available evidence in no way guarantees the truth of its assertions about the past, just as repeated verifications of scientific theories cannot establish either the empirical character or the empirical truth of the theories. Popper's contention is that no amount of corroborating evidence can establish the truth of either a scientific theory or an historical interpretation. This principle seems to do most damage to the status of historical interpretations which are necessarily based on a limited collection of evidence: it would seem that if the available evidence corroborates such an interpretation, no more can be said as to the status of such an interpretation. But Popper's application of this principle to historical interpretations is based on the misapprehension that such limited evidence can only be used literally, so

1. OS, II, 267.

2. OS, II, 267.

3. My phrase, not Popper's.

that it can only corroborate any interpretation which takes account of the available evidence. A critical approach to historical evidence, such as I sketched, opens an escape from these restrictions.

What gives the exceptional interpretations mentioned above their semblance of scientific character, in Popper's eyes, is that they result from an attempt to overthrow an antecedent interpretation of the same basic evidence, so that something partially analogous to falsification has taken place. Popper does not explain how it is possible for a historian, in some exceptional cases, to overthrow his sole authority's interpretation, when he is in general confined by the interpretations which his authorities provide. As evidence that such "semi-scientific" interpretations are possible, Popper instances his interpretation of Plato in The Open Society. Popper's use of this example seems to assume that the corpus of Plato's works provides a single and unique authority for Plato's ideas, which is not quite correct as we also have writings of Aristotle and Xenophon. Nor is it the case that Popper has overthrown a point of view transmitted in what he takes to be his single authority, the works of Plato. Rather, what Popper has overthrown is a widespread interpretation of Plato by later commentators rather than an interpretation specifically transmitted in the sources for Plato's ideas: Popper has shown to be untenable the view, advocated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, that Plato was an ideological forefather of liberalism.

Popper has been misled by an apparent analogy to his analysis of scientific method, into proposing a rule for "semi-scientific" historical interpretations that does not work in practice. There are counter-examples which satisfy Popper's criterion of proposing an interpretation which "radically diverges" from that of the main authority, without thereby in any way acquiring a resemblance to scientific hypotheses. One such example occurs in the historiography of the French revolution. That Pierre Gaxotte used the work of Albert Mathiez and Jean Jaures, republican and social historians respectively to argue that the Jacobins were proto-Bolsheviks does not give Gaxotte's interpretation a semi-scientific character. Gaxotte's divergent use of their work would not suffice to convince practising historians that his interpreta-

tion is more scientific than its antecedents.<sup>1</sup> Rather, historians would recognise that Gaxotte's interpretation "radically diverges" from those of Mathiez and Jaures because his political beliefs differ from theirs and impinge upon his interpretation: Gaxotte attempts to draw a parallel between the French revolution and certain twentieth century developments, namely Russian communism, which he views with disfavour, in order to discredit the origins of French Republicanism. Whether Gaxotte's interpretation improves on or falls short of those of Mathiez and Jaures depends on the uses made by the several historians of the evidence available to them; and the comparative merits of these interpretations cannot be determined simply in terms of whether a subsequent interpretation diverges from a preceding interpretation, for the previous interpretation might be superior in terms of the criteria discussed above.

What goes wrong with Popper's suggested rule for an exception to the alleged general circularity of historical interpretations is not that the partial analogy with falsifying scientific theories does not go far enough. Popper's characterization of historical evidence as limited in ways that make most interpretations circular, requires that historians can only make literal use of previously interpreted evidence; in proposing an exception to the circularity from which Popper alleges that most historical interpretations suffer, Popper does not say that a historical interpretation may diverge from the interpretation given by its sole source because a critical use has been made of such a source, although the value of Popper's novel interpretation of Plato comes from Popper's critical attitude to earlier interpretations of Plato. Such an admission would ruin Popper's general case for the circularity of most historical interpretations, if Popper could not explain why such criticism is not generally possible; but it is the only way to make Popper's recipe for a non-circular interpretation work, and to exclude such reversals of authorities as that of Gaxotte, which are clearly no more scientific than the historical interpretations which Popper considers circular.

1. R.W. Greenlaw discusses Gaxotte's use of Mathiez's and Jaures' work in his introduction to The Economic Origins of the French Revolution (Boston, 1958), xi-xii.



The soundness of historical interpretations of a single source, as of any interpretation, depends in part on the extent to which critical use is made of the available evidence. Although Popper professes allegiance to the critical approach in general, as the primary article of his rationalism, he does not seem to have allowed, in The Open Society or The Poverty of Historicism, that historians can use a critical approach in interpreting the evidence available to them. In these works, Popper's most accessible analysis of historical methodology, the writ of his critical approach has been restricted to techniques practicable in the theoretical sciences. In addition to Popper's rigid application of his doctrine of the unity of scientific method to historical work, his analysis has suffered from his assumption that the historian can only make literal use of historical evidence. Popper's analysis of historical methodology can be explained only by Popper's lack of first-hand knowledge of historical work, and little second-hand knowledge.

Popper's claim that the whole gamut of historical interpretations, from general to specific, must in most cases be circular or, in other words untestable, is based on a sequence of two considerations, which I shall distinguish as, respectively, epistemological and methodological. The starting point for Popper's analysis of historical interpretations is epistemological: a rejection of the classical empiricist theory of the mind as a blank slate or absorbent sponge, a theory which Popper calls the "bucket theory of mind". Popper maintains that because it is impossible to apprehend the infinite and overwhelming mass of facts and aspects of facts which the world contains, knowledge presupposes criteria of selection or points of view. Scientific theories provide selective criteria for the theoretical sciences; the historian, confronted by the infinite facts of the past, organizes his selection thereof by means of a point of view or an interpretation. Popper argues for the necessity of historical interpretations on epistemological grounds; he characterizes historical interpretations on the basis of methodological considerations about the uses of historical evidence. Popper argues that because no new evidence can be produced, bearing on a given historical interpretation, historical interpretations can never,

or only rarely, be tested, and for the most part can only be corroborated. Thus the relationship of a historical interpretation to its corroborating evidence is a vicious circle: all subsequent interpretations of any item of historical evidence "must fit in" with the original point of view from which the evidence was first collected.

Because Popper analyzes historical evidence in terms of its dependence on points of view, his methodological arguments may appear to derive straightforwardly from his epistemological arguments; but this is not the case. That the existence of historical records presupposes witnesses who had certain points of view that led them to record selections from past events does not yield the methodological basis for Popper's claim that historical interpretations are for the most part circular: this claim requires that such historical records consistently implement the points of view of the witnesses who composed them. What a source records and what its writer wished to convey, may, as a matter of fact, diverge. No epistemological reason can be found why a source may only contain evidence that supports the point of view that its writer wants to transmit. Thus Popper's epistemological argument does not establish that a source may only contain evidence corroborating the witness's point of view. There are a variety of circumstances under which evidence and point of view may diverge, in a source: for example, a witness may be under some misapprehension as to what evidence does in fact support his claim, and this misapprehension may appear more prominent with the passage of time. Thus the methodological basis for Popper's claim that historical interpretations must be circular does not stand up to examination.

Although I have not questioned Popper's epistemological argument that knowledge presupposes criteria of selection or prior points of view, and although I have not questioned the applicability of this doctrine to historiography, I have disputed his methodological contentions about the relation of such points of view, in historiography, to the historical evidence on which they are based. I have argued that the circularity which Popper attributes to historical interpretations, on the basis of his methodological considerations, has not been proven. Popper's argument only applies to one

class of historical evidence, testimonies, and here it does not stand up.

I shall consider Popper's further characterization of historical interpretations, his doctrine of the plurality of possible interpretations of any given collection of historical evidence, before examining the applicability of Popper's epistemological argument to the practice of history: how we are to construe the requirement that the historian adopt a point of view, or selective criteria, if he is to compose a connected account of the past.

## V. The Many Histories

The general circularity of historical interpretations has, Popper thinks, important consequences for their status. Since the adequacy of historical interpretations can only be appraised in terms of their coherence with the appropriate limited collection of relevant facts, there is no logical reason why there cannot be more than one adequate interpretation of any given set of facts. Popper argues that historians must abandon the

"naive belief that any definite set of historical records can...be interpreted in one way only." 1.

"Historians often do not see any other interpretation which fits the facts as well as theirs does..." 2.

Any individual scientist may have a similar blind spot in favour of his own theory as the sole possible explanation of a given set of problematic facts, but when several "competing and incompatible"<sup>3</sup> theories have been proposed to explain such facts, scientists are rarely left in a quandary, because they have means of deciding between such theories by conducting "new crucial experiments": creating and manipulating situations where at least one of the competing theories will be falsified.

Thus, Popper argues that if several theoretical explanations, or points

1. OS, II, 266

2. OS, II, 266

3. OS, II, 266.



of view, are possible for a given and limited set of scientific facts, there is no logical reason why it should not be possible to propose several adequate interpretations of a given set of historical facts. The possibility of a plurality of points of view, in historiography as in science, requires that there be a limited set of relevant facts. By extending the collection of relevant facts, which is always possible with respect to testable scientific theories, and never possible, Popper argues, with regard to historical interpretations, scientists can decide rationally between the competing theories.

The possibility of a plurality of points of view, Popper maintains, is more than theoretical in the practice of history:

"each generation has its own troubles and problems, and therefore its own interests and its own point of view." 1.

And Popper maintains that there is no way of deciding, other than arbitrarily, between the various adequate interpretations of any given set of records.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, are we to make of the welter of interpretations of the records of the past? Popper maintains that since we cannot decide between several adequate interpretations of any given collection of evidence, we must accept these interpretations as representing "crystallizations of points of view" which are "complementary":

"After all, we study history because we are interested in it, and perhaps because we wish to learn something about our own problems." 3.

In finding this rationale for the practice of history, Popper is looking at the brighter side of the methodological limitations of historiography. The regulative ideal of scientific method, objectivity, is "inapplicable" to historiography.<sup>4</sup> For a statement to be objective, Popper requires that intersubjective agreement be possible as to the acceptability of the

1. OS, II, 267.

2. That is after excluding those interpretations which Popper considers historicist, OS, II, 268-9.

3. OS, II, 267-8.

4. OS, II, 268.

statement;<sup>1.</sup> the acceptability of a statement in the theoretical sciences depends on its testability. By contrast, intersubjective agreement will not be possible on any one historical interpretation of a given collection of evidence, on Popper's principles, because further adequate and complementary interpretations of the same evidence can be formulated, and there is no way of deciding, non-arbitrarily, on any one of the plurality of possible interpretations. Thus the distinguishing characteristic of scientific method, its objectivity, is unattainable by the resources and methods available to the historian.

It may be a profound truth about historiography that a multiplicity of interpretations of past evidence are possible: that history can always be rewritten from a different perspective. But the force of Popper's observations about the multiplicity of possible historical interpretations is diminished by the serious flaws in the arguments which he employs to reach these conclusions. Consequently the inter-relations of the various possible points of view in historiography may be rather different from what Popper alleges.

It is clear that Popper's argument for the multiplicity of possible interpretations assumes that historical evidence is limited. The practice of history cannot be considered objective, because there is no rational way of arbitrating between the various possible interpretations of any given, limited, collection of evidence. Against this recurrent assumption of Popper's, it might be argued that the historian's critical techniques enable him to discover new aspects of extant records, so that historical evidence is never limited in the required sense.

More specifically against Popper's construction of his case for the actual multiplicity of historical interpretations, it might be argued that, in fact, historians who propose alternative interpretations of given subjects from the past, rarely do work from the same sets of records. The impact

1. Cf. discussion of Popper's criteria for objectivity, above, Chapter Three, p. 106-7

of these considerations may vary at the different ends of the spectrum of concepts which Popper calls historical interpretations. Consider two "general interpretations" of history, proposed by a Marxist and a Christian respectively. They might both work from the same records of civilized decadence, and each might interpret these records as indicating the inevitable collapse of societies which do not adhere to their respective faiths. Thus two alternative and adequate general interpretations might be formulated from the same evidence. Such interpretations as these examples might also be considered extra-historical.

For an example of a plurality of specific interpretations, consider once again the case of Gaxotte's use of the evidence uncovered by Mathiez and Jaures. We may suppose that instead of relying on the work done by these latter historians, Gaxotte had consulted the same collection of records. The results of their respective labours would then be two sets of alternative and opposed interpretations. Would historians accept both these interpretations as equally adequate and complementary? As I have argued earlier, the conditions for the adequacy of a specific interpretation are rather different from what Popper suggests. In analyzing the respective merits of these two interpretations, other historians would consider the uses made by each historian of the common stock of records: the merits of the competing specific interpretations would be judged partly in terms of the critical use made of the relevant evidence.

If the work of any one of these historians were marked by his bias, in taking dubious evidence at face value, or in misinterpreting evidence to suit his purposes, such faults would constitute weaknesses in his interpretation. It is because specific historical interpretations rest on a critical use of evidence, not a literal adoption of sources as authorities, that these interpretations can be appraised as arguments, and they represent something more than "crystallizations of points of view".

In mitigation of my criticism, it may be argued that Popper has touched on an important point about the practice of history: that although competing historical interpretations are open to critical examination, there may



still be an irreducible plurality of historical interpretations of a given topic which are neither grossly biased nor incompetent. In this respect, then, there is no history but only histories. However, I shall argue that the many histories are not as fragmented as Popper seems to think because of their relationships with the traditions of historical knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

## VI. Several Arguments for the Necessity of Points of View in Historical Work

I have suggested that, although Popper is not unique in maintaining that historical interpretations, or points of view, are required for the practice of history, his development of this position differs in important respects from other views of this genre. In Popper's argument there is an epistemological and a methodological component; I have argued that although Popper presents his methodological ideas as a direct application of his epistemological ideas to historiography, reinforcing his points with contrasts from his analysis of scientific procedures, these methodological ideas are in no wise entailed by Popper's epistemology, as can be seen once again by considering various other arguments for the necessity of points of view in history, which proceed rather differently from the necessity of selection. Popper's more specific characterization of historical points of view on his methodological basis, as preconceived in a strong sense, is untenable because the methodological limitations for which Popper argues do not apply to the practice of history.

Various other arguments for the necessity of points of view in historiography proceed from the same epistemological basis as Popper does: a replacement of the classical empiricist doctrine of the bare and absorbent mind by the claim that selection, and thus criteria for selection, are presupposed in knowledge, because knowledge cannot reproduce all there is, but must select from and order infinite materials in order to apprehend something

1. See Section VII below.

of them. In application of this latter doctrine to historiography, it has been maintained that, as a matter of fact, the historian's criteria for selection are determined by, respectively, societal, chronological or psychological factors, in various forms and combinations.

Societal factors may be claimed more generally to determine all knowledge of social life, in the sociology of knowledge: this doctrine denies that any individual's knowledge of social life can be independent of the society to which he belongs.<sup>1</sup> Thus the criteria of selection on which a historian must rely, in composing any historical account of the past, are constituted by the society to which he belongs. The criteria of selection which a historian may adopt are markedly limited by the historian's location in society; by his social class, in a further specification: no historian, it is claimed, can view past events from outside the perspective set by his position in the class structure of society. Thus bourgeois historians write bourgeois history, and proletarian historians write proletarian history.<sup>2</sup> This theory might run into difficulties if historians whose social class has been ascertained were to produce historiography appropriate to a social class other than that to which they are alleged to belong. Various forms of this doctrine have enjoyed considerable influence.

Analogous principles may be invoked in support of the claim that the historian's criteria of selection are formed by his chronological position;<sup>3</sup> thus the perspective from which a historian views the past is alleged to be set by the concerns of the time in which he lives. As it was claimed that the historian cannot escape being the spokesman of his social class, so now the claim is that the historian is necessarily the child of his times.

1. A doctrine which Popper names 'sociologism'. His chief discussion of the sociology of knowledge (chapter 23, OS) is examined below in Chapter Six, in connection with Popper's arguments for methodological individualism.

2. What kind of historiography is produced by Mannheim's loophole category, the 'free-wheeling intellectuals', whose thought, Mannheim claims, is free from class fetters?

3. A doctrine which Popper names 'historism'.

The slogans of this doctrine, which imply that a change of generation transforms the historian's criteria of selection, are open to obvious objections, because the sequence of generations is more or less continuous. But if this position is understood as the claim that the history written during any one stretch of time, say a decade, will and perhaps must differ from history written in another such period, and if such differences are ascribed to the characteristic viewpoints of the historians practising in the respective periods, this claim is not open to such obvious objections as the statement that in each generation historians employ different criteria of selection. It may indeed be the case that the periods for which the respective historiographies are compared have certain distinctive characteristics, due to political, economic or social factors: characteristics such as wars, depressions, booms, anxiety or apathy, which influence the tenor of contemporary historical writing. Under such circumstances, this claim that the historian's perspective is shaped by the times in which he lives, may appear to be something of a truism.

There may be still something more to the idea that a different chronological position permits a different and perhaps valuable perspective on the past, even without the proviso of changing interests and concerns on the part of historians. Danto's analysis of narrative sentences explains why this should be so.<sup>1</sup> Narrative sentences have a major part in historical writing. Such sentences

"refer to at least two time-separated events, and describe the earlier event...with reference to the latter". 2.

Thus, the statement that the author of The Principia was born in 1642 does not merely register a birth; it indicates also that the infant born then later wrote a certain book. The significance of that birth can only be stated subsequent to the event.<sup>3</sup>

1. Arthur C. Danto, Analytical Philosophy of History, Cambridge University Press, 1965, chap. viii, pp. 143-182.

2. Danto, p. 159, p. 167.

3. Danto, p. 158 for this example.



Danto argues that historians characteristically use such descriptions, and that history continues to be written because any past event may be re-described at a later time: the early history of atomic energy would be differently described before and after August 9, 1945; or Harold Wilson's past exercises of his skills as a politician might be differently described at different times in his career and subsequently. Danto's theory is that historians characteristically describe an event in terms of its place in one or more processes.

The possibility of such new descriptions of historical events does not invalidate the previous descriptions. Succeeding descriptions are, rather, supplementary. Each of a chronological sequence of narrative descriptions is a partial contribution to saying what is significant about the events described. In narrating the history of atomic energy, for example, it would be misleading to present the early years solely in the perspective of Hiroshima, and it would be difficult as well to give a fair account of the hopes men held then, in this perspective; it would also be misleading, as well as incomplete, to write a history of these years without regard to the sequel. In writing a history of these early years of atomic energy, a historian might seek to achieve a contrapuntal effect, through the different chronological perspectives or processes in which these events can be understood.

The outcome of Danto's analysis is that new and different views of the past are perennially possible. But his analysis does not provide the cutting edge of historical relativism. Although the logic of narrative sentences implies that each generation has the opportunity to write its own history, to speak loosely in terms of slogans, it does not support the claim that any such history has only roughly contemporaneous validity. The logic of narrative sentences gives grounds only for the belief that history has to be constantly rewritten.

Thus, insofar as a historian's point of view is a matter of chronology, the history he writes is partial in the sense that it is not a complete picture of the past - Danto's argument implies that historiography can never

be complete at any one time - but not that it is partial in the sense of being biased. Danto's argument seems to me a sound basis for the proposition that historiography is creative because it is inexhaustible: past events can be viewed from new points of view. The multiplicity of possible points of view can then be seen to be supplementary: as partial contributions to understanding the full significance of past events.

A further suggestion as to the character of the historian's viewpoint has been put forward: namely, that the societal and chronological factors discussed above do not fully characterize the historian's viewpoint, because the personality of the historian has a substantial effect on the criteria of selection that he adopts, an effect which is distinct from those of societal or chronological factors. Thus, the revolutionary view of eighteenth century English history which is now known as Namierism was not merely a result of Sir Lewis Namier's unusual social provenance, or of his reaction to the events of his time; Namier's personality must also be taken into account in analyzing his viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> This doctrine might be parodied as reducing historiography to personal quirks, but it may be less nonsensically maintained that the importance of the historian's personality in the picture he gives of the past is "akin" to the importance of the novelist's personality in his writing, because

"no one else has quite the same grasp and the same vision of the events to be narrated." 2.

These several theories of the character of the historian's point of view have two implications: that the historian's criteria for selection are effectively set by factors over which the historian himself has little control; and moreover, that the selections resulting from such viewpoints will not be acceptable at any time, in any social milieu, or by anybody - that such viewpoints are not universalizable. There is a grain of truth in these

1. On Namier as a person, see Isaiah Berlin, "I.B. Namier", Encounter, Nov. 1966, vol. xxvii, no. 5 p.32-45 Berlin disclaims any attempt to evaluate Namier as a historian.

2. W.H. Walsh, "The limits of Scientific History", Historical Studies, III, ed. James Hogan (London, 1961), p.54.

theories, in that the work of actual historians is in fact influenced by societal, chronological or personal factors. But such empirical observations do not establish that historians must necessarily submit to any or all of these several influences.

Rather than attempt to specify the kind of factors alleged to shape or control the criteria of selection which the historian must adopt in the practice of history, a somewhat different approach might be taken: a more general case might be made for the necessity of selective criteria in historical work. It has been suggested that the statement that the historian must select in order to write history is misleadingly elliptic. It is more accurate to say that the historian selects "in accordance with criteria of importance" which differ in part from the criteria of importance employed in scientific selection.<sup>1</sup> A scientist may support his judgements of importance, on which his selection of a topic for investigation is based, by reference to the connections of whatever he has selected with other scientific facts or theories. Not all of the historian's judgements of importance are like those of the scientist. A historian's selection of events may be guided by the causal connections of these events with other events; the basis for his selection is, then, the "instrumental importance" of these events, a basis which is comparable to the scientist's criterion for selection. But a historian's choice of historical subject need not rest solely on that subject's connections with other aspects of the past. In addition to such statements as, "the industrial revolution was important on account of its consequences", a historian may assert the importance of the French revolution, not just because of its consequences, but because it was "an event of importance in itself, perhaps as marking a significant manifestation of the free spirit of man." 2.

Or, to adapt one of Popper's ideas: to write history in terms of the fight for the open society or with regard to the emphasis put on men's rational

1. Walsh, op. cit. pp. 50-51.

2. ibid., p. 51.



capacities in any age involves more than investigating the influence of these factors on events; presupposed in these interpretations of history are judgements as to the intrinsic importance of the factors considered to be their central subjects.

The presence of such judgements of intrinsic importance in historical work may be effectively concealed by the existence of a consensus among practising historians;<sup>1.</sup> or it may be denied by historians who object to the implication that such judgements make historiography something other than scientific. Walsh's claim is that judgements of intrinsic importance cannot be excised from historiography in the vain hope of making it more scientific. Historical writing, restricted to description or ascertaining causal connections - if such historiography were possible - would be dry-as-dust. Although curiosity about aspects of the past may lead to investigations of the instrumental importance of certain events, historical work does not begin or end with considerations of instrumental importance alone. The practice of history involves some "assessment" of aspects of the past, and thus requires judgements of intrinsic importance.<sup>2.</sup> Walsh suggests that no rationale has been found for the various moral outlooks which foster judgements of intrinsic importance.

The use which Walsh makes of his distinction between instrumental and intrinsic importance in analysing the status of our knowledge of the past can be usefully restated in Popperite terms without too much distortion. Intersubjective agreement can be reached on judgements of instrumental importance because the basis for such judgements rests on imputing causal connections. Thus, the instrumental importance of historical events can be objectively appraised. But no such basis for intersubjective agreement on the intrinsic importance of various factors in history has been found, nor can such a basis be established. Such judgements derive from the historian's "values" (Walsh) or his "interests"<sup>3.</sup> (Popper), and these are not universal-

1. Walsh asserts that this is largely the case in Britain. 2. Walsh, op.cit. p.55.  
3. Popper's term "interests" is, on its own, ambiguous. In the context of Popper's argument, the "interests" with which historians write history derive from the "troubles and problems" of the generation to which they belong (OS, II, 267). "Interests" in Popper's usage may be construed as contemporary concerns or values.

zable.

In both Walsh's analysis of the limits of scientific history, and Popper's case for the necessity of points of view in historiography, there is a common contention which is crucial in each of these arguments; that judgements of instrumental importance alone are not sufficient to construct organized accounts of aspects of the past. Implicit or explicit in such accounts necessarily are judgements of intrinsic importance.

M.G. White's discussion of the "truth-transcendant" dimension of historical work, "historical memorability", is a differently worded statement of what is basically the same idea: that the selection of subjects for historical work involves judgements of intrinsic importance, which do not seem to be universalizable. White asserts that

"I know of no rock of historical practice or usage upon which to rest some definition of historical memorability. Historians may in one generation band together and by fiat rule out certain kinds of true histories as nonhistories, but I should doubt that they could provide any clear notion of memorability which supposedly flows from the nature of history as a discipline". 1.

Walsh's suggestion that there seems to be no way of resolving the variety of judgements of intrinsic importance, and Popper's refusal of the title of objectivity to historical investigations because of the allegedly irreducible plurality of possible points of view, and White's contention about historical memorability as well, all amount to a rejection of Collingwood's suggestion that "the idea of history" can in some real if obscure way guide the historian in his work of selection and construction.<sup>2</sup>

1. M.G. White, "The Logic of Historical Narration", Philosophy and History, ed. Sidney Hook (N.Y., 1963), pp. 26-27.

2. R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History ed. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1946), pp. 248-50.

## VII. The Many Histories and the Traditions of Historical Knowledge

It was once held that the historian's task was to let himself be absorbed by the past in order that he might subsequently reflect that past. This older belief has been relegated and replaced by the contemporary orthodoxy, that the writing of history requires that the historian have a point of view, an orthodoxy supported more by the societal, chronological and psychological doctrines mentioned earlier than by the philosophers' analyses of historical selection discussed above.<sup>1</sup>

Recently a historian has entered his dissent from the prevalent view. G.R. Elton, in The Practice of History, attacks the belief that the historian's choice of a problem for investigation irrevocably processes the evidence that he brings to bear on the solution of his problem, that the point of view which the historian implements is preconceived in that

"further questions [are] themselves predetermined by the first question asked." 2.

"The evidence is allegedly never in a position to play freely on the enquiring mind, to suggest questions which are forced upon the historian, not forced by him on the material."

"It is for this reason that some would deny the possibility of objective history at all and would claim that there is no history, only historians." 3.

The position attacked<sup>4</sup> resembles that which Popper takes, although it is not the main issue in the other theories of the historian's point of view discussed above. In Elton's attack, as in Popper's case for the necessity

1. Recently I heard a historian criticize a new book on the last tsar of Russia, Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra, (Robert Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra, London, 1968) because the critic thought the author lacked a point of view, and also that to write good - or interesting history - a historian must have a point of view.

2. G.R. Elton, The Practice of History (London, 1967) p. 61. 3. Elton, p.62.

4. Elton is primarily arguing against E.H. Carr's views, expressed in What is History? (London, 1962)



of points of view in historiography, the ways in which historical evidence is and can be used are crucial.

Elton admits that

"there possibly are historians who proceed in this unsatisfactory way"

but that this is not to say that they are good historians.

Elton says that

"One can speak only from personal experience, and I must say that things do not happen quite like this." 1.

The "proper - and, as I believe, the common - way" is that the historian's "initial choice" of "main area or study or line of approach" only delimits the evidence of which he is, in the early stages, the "servant":

"...he will, or should, ask no specific questions until he has absorbed what it says. At least, his questions remain general, varied, flexible: he opens his mind to the evidence both passively (listening) and actively (asking). The mind will indeed soon react with questions, but these are questions suggested by the evidence, and though different men may find different questions arising from the same evidence, the differences are only to a very limited extent dictated by themselves. The part they themselves will play in these differences lies in different responses to the suggestions put out by the evidence. After this initial stage, the questions arising will be pursued specifically, and at this point the master-servant relationship is reversed. Now the historian specifically seeks evidence to answer his questions, and if his selection is ill-considered or too narrow he may introduce distortion. The interaction of the material and the questions asked of it is very intricate and sophisticated, but it is not true that in the proper pursuit of his study, the historian's need to select destroys the independent existence of history." 2.

Elton's argument is that the kind of initial questions which the historian asks are too broad and general to determine his results in any way that

1. Elton, p. 62.

2. Elton, pp. 62-63.

would suit the preconceived point of view theory.

A concrete example of how a historian selects and handles a topic may be apposite. Hugh Trevor-Roper's essay on "The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries"<sup>1</sup> illustrates Elton's contentions as to the way in which a historian selects. Trevor-Roper's avowed purpose in writing this essay to correct historical misrepresentations of the temper of these centuries, which have been anachronistically viewed as part of the allegedly steady progress of modernity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and beyond, a view which distorts these centuries in the light of later developments. Thus it was assumed that witchcraft must have been on the decline during these centuries, as a corollary of the spread of modernity, as it was assumed that the force of modernity would dissolve superstition, an assumption which Trevor-Roper maintains is contradicted by the facts: the flourishing of witchcraft and of associated superstitions and ways of thought antithetic to modern rationalism.

Thus Trevor-Roper is disputing the established view of the instrumental importance or influence of modernity and rationalism during these centuries. His essay may also presuppose a judgement as to the intrinsic importance of progress, which differs from that presupposed by the established view of these centuries. Trevor-Roper's work may involve, as well, a personal facet in that he delights in debunking sacred cows.

Thus the criterion by which Trevor-Roper selects an aspect of the past for investigation and the way in which he presents his chosen topic are guided by the aim of correcting an accepted misrepresentation of the past, according to which the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries take their place in the roll-call of modernity. That is, we might say that Trevor-Roper is guided by "the idea of history" in attempting to correct the established picture of these centuries; and it seems to me that such intentions guide

1. In his collection of essays, Religion, The Reformation and Social Change (London, 1967), pp. 90 - 192.

historians more generally in their selection of topics for investigation.

We may also view Trevor-Roper's approach as illustrating some of Elton's contentions against the view that the historian's initial question predetermines his subsequent use of the evidence. Trevor-Roper's initial selection is general: the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One "suggestion" which Trevor-Roper receives from contemporary evidence is that it conflicts with subsequent historiography of these centuries: these centuries have been thought to be more modern - more like their sequel - than they were in actual fact. This false preconception allowed these centuries to be neatly slotted into a steady progress of modernity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, a process in which they constituted the chief intermediary stage. The effects of this preconception can be seen quite strikingly in the assumption of historians that witchcraft was - must have been - on the decline during these centuries. By developing a more accurate appraisal of the strength and influence of witchcraft during these centuries, Trevor-Roper intends to contribute to the demolition of a more general misinterpretation.

Trevor-Roper's essay thus seems to fit Elton's analysis. It might also be considered to be a historical interpretation of the type which Popper believes rare: a "semi-scientific" interpretation, or one that "radically deviates" from established authority.<sup>1</sup> My contention is that the majority of historical interpretations are "semi-scientific" in the sense of critically

215-171. A qualification here: Popper, in introducing this concept (discussed above, pp. 35-37), speaks of historical interpretations based on a single source. The established reading of such a source as of any collection of evidence depends on, and is perhaps largely determined by, historiographical traditions; and this established reading is not wholly dependent on its alleged authority, for influential preconceptions in the secondary sources may affect such a reading. Thus, what Popper is criticizing is the established view of Plato, rather than an image of himself which Plato sought to disseminate.



examining the established view of their subject, and perhaps revising this picture,<sup>1</sup> and that those interpretations which are circular in Popper's sense of reproducing the literal content of their sources are not acceptable as history.

One way in which it seems to me that the sceptical dissolution of history into historians implementing viewpoints goes wrong is in neglecting the relation of any individual historical work to the traditions of historical knowledge. The points of view which historians implement are rarely altogether personal, or wholly determined by contemporaneous factors: a historian's foray into a previously explored field is an attempt to review and perhaps revise an established picture of the past. The historian's point of view relates to traditions of historical knowledge, as well as to interests, values or judgements of intrinsic importance.

Although a historian's results may be shaped by his interests, values, or judgements of intrinsic importance, his work is not guided merely by the desire or intention to imprint an image in accordance with these values on the traditions of historical knowledge. The intention with which historians work is that of contributing to the idea of history, even though they may never succeed in realizing this intention.<sup>2</sup> That is, historians are guided by the ideal of correcting the established picture of the past in the light of some ideal of historical knowledge, even though they may never succeed

1. Cf. Popper's "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," CR. p. 122, where he says that a "critical attitude" towards a tradition

"may result either in acceptance or in rejection, or perhaps compromise."

Historians, when they have adequate evidence, take a critical attitude towards the traditions of historical knowledge, which is very much like the "critical attitude" that Popper describes in this essay. To be sure, there is not always sufficient evidence for a historian to accept or reject an account, as in Greek history where there may be only one source for important events.

2. Collingwood, loc. cit. says something to this same effect.

in realizing this ideal, and even if factors other than this regulative ideal may appear more prominent to the critic of their results. The ongoing attempt to construct a more accurate picture of the past, in accordance with "the idea of history", would thus seem to provide one fairly secure criterion for historical memorability which guides historical work and the appraisal of historical work, even if it is not always adhered to or realized in practice - even though it may not be possible to distill the idea of history from historians' results.

My summary of Trevor-Roper's intentions in his essay on witchcraft is apposite in this connection. It is by arguments such as Trevor-Roper puts forward that a choice of subject is justified to other historians. Whether this general line of reasoning is applicable is a criterion for the "inter-subjective acceptability" of a choice of topic for historical investigation.

#### VIII. Has History any Meaning?

Popper states dramatically in the last chapter of The Open Society that there is "no such thing" as history.<sup>1</sup> Under this heading Popper puts forward at least three contentions. First, that no "concrete history of mankind" can be written. Second, that the history of power politics is no substitute for the unrealizable universal history of mankind. Third, that no meaning can be assigned to the whole of history. How Popper collects these three contentions under one heading that "history has no meaning", can be seen by following his arguments in detail.

"a universal history in the sense of a concrete history of mankind...cannot be written" 2.

because it is logically impossible to include all that such a history must cover:

"the history of all men...of all human hopes, struggles, and sufferings." 3.

1. OS, II, 269-280, chapter 25, sec. iv; the citation is taken from OS, II, 270.

2. OS, II, 270

3. OS, II, 270.

From the necessity of selection arise what Popper calls "the many histories",<sup>1.</sup> of various subjects and aspects of human life.

Second, what has been taken by "most people"<sup>2.</sup> to be the history of mankind is nothing of the kind:

"the history of power politics (which) is nothing but the history of international crime and mass murder"

has been

"elevated into the history of the world." 3.

Popper gives three reasons why this particular one of "the many histories" has been mistaken for the history of mankind.<sup>4.</sup> "Power affects us all", which is not the case with many of the possible and actual subjects of histories, such as poetry; "men are inclined to worship power", and this inclination has been encouraged:

"those in power wanted to be worshipped and could enforce their wishes. Many historians wrote under the supervision of the emperors, the generals and the dictators." 5.

Lastly, Popper lambasts "some apologists for Christianity" who have thought that "God reveals Himself" in "the history of political power":

"that history has meaning; and that its meaning is the purpose of God." 6.

Popper links these three contentions: that writing "a concrete history of mankind" is logically impossible; and that the history of political power, deified by some apologists for Christianity, is no substitute for such a history. This linkage is part of Popper's dissection of the style of thought which he attributes to historicism, but for the purpose of examining the scope of Popper's critique of history it is worthwhile to consider these three ideas separately, for the first two at least have implications beyond what Popper considers to be historicism.

1. OS, II, 270.

2. OS, II, 269

3. OS, II, 270

4. OS, II, 270-1

5. OS, II, 271

6. OS, II, 271.



In developing his case that there is no such thing as history, <sup>in the singular</sup> Popper proceeded from the impossibility of writing "a concrete history of mankind" and the epistemological necessity of selection, to maintaining that <sup>certain</sup> ~~the~~ "ideas of objectivity" <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ "inapplicable"<sup>1</sup> to the practice of history. Popper's <sup>account</sup> ~~conclusion~~ has been questioned on the grounds that historians make use of techniques of criticism which meet Popper's standards for objectivity. If there is "no such thing" as "a concrete history of mankind", historians can nonetheless work with the regulative idea of contributing to a history of mankind which can never be completely written; and I think that many historians view monographic work in this light. I have argued that historians possess inter-subjective standards for appraising historical work as contributing to a complete history of mankind which can never be realized.

Popper criticizes the undue importance attributed to the history of political power, which has wrongly been taken to represent the history of mankind. Insofar as Popper's strictures are meant to apply to the practice of history, they are outdated. To be sure, historians such as Leopold von Ranke wrote political history as though it were universal history, but this is nowadays considered a narrow conception of historiography by practising historians, who write "the many histories" of various subjects and aspects of human life: the history of art, or printing, or of economic and social aspects of past events and circumstances. But historiography is not to be understood quite as nominalistically as Popper contends, for practising historians share an idea of history, marked out by critical standards and the relevance of particular topics to general history, by which they can appraise the importance of written histories as contributing to the unrealizable "concrete history of mankind".

As for those apologists for Christianity, who have thought that the infamies narrated in the history of political power manifested the hand of God, these views are - to make a distinction, the use of which would have done much to clarify Popper's discussion of history throughout - meta-historical speculations.

1. OS, II, 268 cf. above. The two ideas of objectivity that Popper <sup>here</sup> rejects as inapplicable to history are: first, that historical facts can provide a sound basis for writing history as it actually happened; and second, that historical interpretations are, or can be, open to intersubjective criticism (Popper's standard for objectivity, cf. Chap 3, p. 107).

Thus the various contentions which Popper uses to argue that "history has no meaning"<sup>1</sup> do not have much impact on the practice of history. Popper's concern is with the question of whether the whole of history can be said to have a meaning, and not with the rather different question of how historians can show that particular events are meaningful. Popper's critique of historical interpretations as circular, as the Conventionalists maintained of scientific theories, assumes that there is little to distinguish meta-historical speculations from the conjectures of a practising historian, and it has been argued that, on the contrary, there are considerable differences between these two genres.

#### IX. The Implications of Popper's Later Ideas on History

In subsequent writings Popper has removed the coping-stone of the case he constructed for the circularity of historical interpretations, a case which was claimed to show that historiography could not reach objective results. It has been argued in the earlier pages of this chapter that Popper based his case on certain alleged limitations on the use of historical evidence.

In his later writings Popper has claimed that historians as well as social scientists can make use of situational logic, and that analysis in terms of situational logic gives objective results.<sup>2</sup> Popper's exegesis of how it is possible for situational logic to be an objective analysis of historical actions withdraws the basis from which he argued that historical interpretations must in general be circular: namely, the alleged limitations on the uses of historical evidence.

1. OS, II, 269.

2. Popper, "Historical Explanation," an interview with Michael Tanner, John Dunn and Alistair Young, Cambridge Opinion 28 (1962) pp. 21-25; and Popper, "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie, 14(1962), p. 233-248. Cf. above Chapter Three.

Popper maintains that situational logic is objective on two related counts, first:

"the characteristic thing about situational logic is that it is objective, in the sense that everything about it is, in principle, objectively testable. We can in principle test whether this was, or was not, the situation in which the various people found themselves." 1.

And second, Popper characterizes situational logic as a method of "objective understanding": actions are "objectively understood" as "appropriate" in the given situation, where the situation is taken to include the agent's aims and knowledge, as well as the external situation in which he found himself.<sup>2</sup>

For an action to be "objectively understood", Popper means that it is possible to reach intersubjective agreement on the appropriateness of the action in the situation.<sup>3</sup>

Popper speaks, in connection with situational logic, of improving such explanations by finding new evidence:

"...What is important is the objective reconstruction of the situation, and this should be testable. For example, if we find new evidence, then it should be possible for our reconstructions to be refuted. Very important in history are those reconstructions from which we deduce the existence of new evidence, on the grounds, say, that no man would have acted in such and such a way without also writing such and such a letter." 4.

"Above all, however, situational analyses are rational, open to empirical criticism, and capable of improvement. For example, we can find a letter which shows that the knowledge at Charlemagne's disposal was quite different from what we had assumed in our analysis. 5.

1. Popper, HE, p. 21.

2. LSW, p. 246.

3. *ibid*, p.247. Popper seems to think (p.246-247) that objective understanding is not possible if the analyses of actions are framed in psychological terms; this is an extension of his earlier objections to "psychologism" in his discussion of situational logic in chapter 14 of OS.

Cf. above Chapter three for a discussion of this point.

4. HE. p. 21.

5. LSW, p.247.



In The Open Society Popper claimed that the historian was confined by the interpretations provided in his sources because, "as a rule" "no further facts are available...to test that or any subsequent theory".<sup>1</sup> In his later discussions of situational logic, Popper thinks of historical evidence as less limited than he contended in The Open Society; he has come closer to the actual character and variety of historical evidence.

It might be argued that the conflict I have brought forward is contrived: that in the case of situational logic, Popper is discussing testable historical hypotheses, for which he allowed in The Open Society;<sup>2</sup> and the example of revising a hypothesis about Charlemagne might be thought to support this defence. But the contradiction with which I am concerned does not stem merely from Popper's withdrawal of his simplifying assumption of scanty sources. In saying that explanations in terms of situational logic are "in principle" testable, Popper is saying something more than just that it may be possible to find new evidence with a bearing on the validity of the proposed explanation. If it is to be possible "in principle" to

"test whether this was, or was not the situation in which  
the various people found themselves,"

it must be possible to do something more than follow historical sources literally. Testing whether or not this was indeed the situation in which people found themselves involves more than citing of conflicting sources as authorities. If

"situational analyses are rational, open to empirical  
criticism and capable of improvement"

then these virtues of situational logic presuppose the possibility of considering the relevant evidence critically.

For Popper's claim that situational logic is objective to make sense, it must be possible to make a critical use of the available evidence bearing on the analysis of the situation. And if this is to be possible, the basis of Popper's case for the circularity of the majority of historical interpretations has vanished. For then the historian is not confined to a literal use of his sources, as untestable authorities.

1. OS, II, 265.

2. OS, II, 266.

## Chapter Six

## Social Policy and Social Concepts

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## I. Introduction

In the preceding chapters it has been suggested that Popper's ideas on history and on the related topic of historicism cannot be adequately explicated in purely philosophical terms because these ideas are shaped in important respects by the extra-philosophical influence of Popper's liberalism. The crux of Popper's liberalism, <sup>& individualism</sup> as I shall argue in this chapter, is his liberalism which will be shown to link the multifarious strands of Popper's thought on social policy and the methods of history and the social sciences.

Popper's analysis of historical method involves more than a straightforward application of his views on scientific method, because the limitations that Popper imputes to historical evidence cannot be derived simply from a comparison with the infinite quantity of evidence available in principle for testing scientific theory. As I have argued, Popper's case for these limitations rests on his assumption that historical evidence can only exceptionally be disengaged from the untestable point of view from which it is presented.

Although Popper's presentation of historical method and his resulting conclusions about histories are marked by his ignorance of the actual practice of history, there is more to his case than ignorance. Popper's emphasis on the alleged limitations of historical method is congruent with his defence of liberalism against the threat of totalitarianism, a defence which is, after all, the main theme of The Open Society and its Enemies. At the time when Popper wrote The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society, which present his best-known view of history, the Second World War, fought against Nazi Germany, had roused him to a restatement<sup>1</sup> of the liberalism or "cause of the open society"<sup>2</sup> which, then as now, he held to

1. On Popper's critique of historicism as a restatement of liberalism, see Herbert Marcuse, "The Problem of Historical Laws", Partisan Review vol. XXVI no. 1 (Winter 1959), pp. 117-130, especially p. 126.

2. OS, II, 82.



be integral to Western civilization. The Open Society was, as Popper has written, his war work.<sup>1</sup> What he analyzes as historicism is not only the ideological foundation of Nazi totalitarianism, but also the philosophy of the "intellectual fifth column"<sup>2</sup> threatening Western civilization.

The central antithesis on which Popper's critique of historicism is based is between a mistaken and dangerous hypostatization of social entities, which he attributes to historicism under the name of holism, and the view which he defends that social collectives are no more than

"theoretical constructions referring to the actions and interactions of individuals." 3.

Historicism is based on the thesis that social collectives are supra-individual, a doctrine which is associated with a view of social policy wherein the right of the individual not to be harmed can be overridden for other considerations: social policies may be undertaken for reasons relating to these allegedly supra-individual social collectives; e.g., the defence of the racial purity of a nation may lead to the elimination of those citizens thought to be racially impure. The belief that social collectives really exist as supra-individual entities can have seemingly innocent applications, and has been seen in the hands of the Nazis to have horrendous applications.

The ultimate ground on which Popper opposes historicism is that its conception of social policy relates to supra-individual social collectives and may thus infringe upon the right of the individual not to be harmed. Popper's critique of historicism and the implications of holism for social policy applies to more than the Third Reich. It covers certain kinds of social and economic planning as well, which Popper thinks contain the seeds of a totalitarian outlook inimical to the liberal humanitarianism which he is defending.

1. OS, II, 393 (Addenda I, Facts, Standards and Truth, sec. 17, "Hegel Again"):  
"It should not be forgotten that I looked upon my book as my war effort..."

2. OS, II, 81.

3. PH, 135-6.

The complex body of doctrines which Popper thinks supports this social theory, he calls historicism. It has been argued above, in chapter four, that the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic parts of historicism are not logically linked in the sense that the adherent to the anti-naturalistic doctrines of historicism is committed to the pro-naturalistic doctrines of prophecy by means of developmental laws. Nonetheless, the two sets of doctrines do have a common ground in holism. Although holism will not do the logical work that Popper's argument for the connection between the anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic parts of historicism requires, nonetheless it does indicate that both pro-naturalistic and anti-naturalistic historicism share<sup>1</sup> a crucial premise about the constituents of social life which Popper is concerned to confute.

Although Popper would accept a description of his political views as liberal in a sense best represented in Britain, he would reject my claim that his political liberalism shapes his critique of historical method. He would maintain that his critique rests on methodological and not political considerations. My argument that Popper's analysis of historical method goes markedly beyond an application of his analysis of scientific method, and is affected in this respect by his liberal views, will be substantiated by an investigation of the ramifications of Popper's individualisms, political, methodological and ontological, which I shall carry out in the third section of this chapter, "Popper's Arguments for Methodological Individualism: Methodological Individualism in Practice."

It is certainly not original with me to argue that Popper's ideas on historicism and historical method are affected by his liberalism. Such a claim has been made previously by Herbert Marcuse.<sup>2</sup> Marcuse maintains that

1. PH, p.105.

2. Herbert Marcuse, "Notes on the Problem of Historical Laws," Partisan Review v. 26 (Winter, 1959), 117-129; Marcuse's ideas stimulated my own, although I have not come to quite the same conclusions.

## Popper's

"most telling arguments against historicism are in the last analysis political arguments, and his own position is in the last analysis a political position. The political dimension is not merely superimposed upon the methodological; the latter rather reveals its own political content."

"Popper has...restated some of the philosophical foundations of classical liberalism; Hayek looms large in the supporting footnotes, and the critique of historicism is largely a justification of liberalism against totalitarianism. Liberalism and totalitarianism appear as two diametrically opposed systems: opposed in their economics and politics as well as in their philosophy."

"...the driving force behind Popper's attack on historicism...is...in the last analysis a struggle against history - not spelled with a capital H, but the empirical course of history. Any attempt to rescue the values of liberalism and democracy must account for the emergence of a society that plays havoc with these values." 1.

Marcuse's argument is both speculative and suggestive. He argues that liberalism and totalitarianism are not "diametrically opposed systems" <sup>2</sup> as Popper's remedy for historicism requires, but that the workings of liberalism may give totalitarianism a foothold. The argument is recognizably Marxist, but it is not for that reason to be disregarded. In the chapter on historicism it was noted that Karl Mannheim had earlier defended a similar contention about liberalism in even stronger terms by an argument whose structure parallels that of Popper's critique of historicism: according to Mannheim, the weaknesses of a liberal social order foster totalitarianism, and only a system of large-scale social planning can avert the danger of totalitarianism.

Both cases in this dispute about the relations of liberalism to totalitarianism, Popper's as well as that of Mannheim and Marcuse, involve

1. Marcuse, op. cit. p. 122-3, p. 126, p. 129.

2. Marcuse, p. 126.



speculative considerations about the actual historical relations of such encompassing conceptions as liberalism and totalitarianism. This dispute seems to go beyond the limits which Popper sets for historiography, which is that the meaning given to past facts depends on the point of view of the historian. What is at issue is the significance of and relationship between certain historical structures, liberal and totalitarian social systems. Such speculation is not necessarily to be scoffed at, nor is it unrelated to the significance and communication of the work of professional historians, even if it is fraught with difficulties.

Marcuse's argument for Popper's "struggle against...the empirical course of history" is that Popper does not want to acknowledge the structural or "holistic" social changes which have invalidated the analysis of society which Popper defends. Society is no longer organized, Marcuse insists, in the way that Popper's analysis presupposes:

"Contemporary society is increasingly functioning as a rational whole which overrides the life of its parts, progresses through planned waste and destruction, and advances with the irresistible force of nature - as if governed by inexorable laws...The 'holism' which has become reality must be met by a 'holist' critique of this reality." 1.

Marcuse's critique rests ultimately, as does Popper's analysis of historicism, on extremely general considerations as to the nature of contemporary society in the face of the threat of totalitarianism.

Marcuse overstates his case for the influence of Popper's political opinions on his methodological ideas on one important point. Marcuse implies that Popper is a laissez-faire liberal: Marcuse's reference to Hayek, when he says that Popper's purpose in criticizing historicism is to defend classical liberalism (cf. the second passage cited above, p.4 ) suggests that for Popper as well as for Hayek, any form of state intervention is "the road to serfdom".<sup>2</sup> This implication must be rejected as an overstatement on

1. Marcuse, op. cit., p. 129

2. Although Hayek's views are considerably more subtle than any slogan can suggest, the association his name evokes is with laissez-faire liberalism.

Marcuse's part which weakens his case. Popper's beliefs can and should be distinguished from the extreme laissez-faire views which the phrase "classical liberalism" in conjunction with the name of Hayek evokes.<sup>1</sup> For Popper

"Liberalism and state-interference are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, any kind of freedom is clearly impossible unless it is guaranteed by the state." 2.

Liberalism, as Popper defends it, allows and even requires some state intervention, in accordance with the criteria of piecemeal social engineering.

Popper reconciles some "state-interference" with liberalism through attending to the inhumane effects of a laissez-faire economy which had aroused the wrath of Marx.<sup>3</sup> Under "unrestrained capitalism" or a system of completely free enterprise, the "economically strong" have the freedom to "bully" the "economically weak" and there is no redress or "freedom" for the latter; complete free enterprise only amounts to freedom for some and oppression for others.<sup>4</sup> The "paradox of freedom" is that the result of complete freedom of action is not freedom for all those affected but rather the annulment of freedom.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for the sake of humanitarian principles, as well as to realize freedom, state intervention is required to counteract the oppressive effects of a laissez-faire system.<sup>6</sup>

1. While Hayek might not reject this statement out of hand, Popper's development of his case for interventionism and piecemeal social engineering goes rather further in the direction of allowing for "state-interference" than did Hayek in The Road to Serfdom. Cf. Popper's addition to note 4, chapter 9 (OS, II, 285-6) on Hayek's views as expressed in this book and their relation to what Popper calls piecemeal social engineering.

2. OS, I, iii.

3. OS, II, 124: "I believe that the injustice and inhumanity of the unrestrained 'capitalist system' described by Marx cannot be questioned; but it can be interpreted in terms of...the paradox of freedom".

4. OS, II, 124; cf. note 4 to chap. 7, OS, I, 265: "complete freedom only allows the strong to bully the weak - a more general statement of the 'paradox of freedom'".

5. cf. note 4 to chap. 7, OS I 265.

6. This is what Popper calls the "protectionist theory of the state", OS, I, 111-112.

Popper's notion of interventionism, which stems from interpreting the workings of unrestrained capitalism in terms of the "paradox of freedom", is meant to be a historical analysis as well as a "liberal theory".<sup>1</sup> The rather abstract historical argument which he presents might be thought to require more in the way of historical support than Popper provides. Popper presents his case chiefly by assertion, and without the kind of discussion of evidence that historians might think such argument requires; his historical analysis proceeds at a rather high level. Popper's defence of his "liberal theory" goes beyond the limits he sets for historiography; his development of his idea of interventionism involves something of a speculative interpretation of history, which is less explicitly acknowledged than is the case with his "rationalist interpretation" of history.<sup>2</sup>

Popper's argument for interventionism is what W.W. Rostow called his Stages of Economic Growth: "an alternative to Karl Marx's theory of modern history".<sup>3</sup> Popper intends interventionism to be a substantial historical refutation of Marx's prophecy of an inevitable revolutionary collapse of capitalism. Thus it is meant to complement his logical and methodological arguments against the very enterprise of historical prophecy. Popper argued in his methodological critique of historicism that historical prophecy such as that of Marx is indefensible on logical grounds. His historical argument about interventionism is meant to corroborate his logical analysis of Marx's historical prophecy of the revolutionary and socialist sequels to unrestrained capitalism.

Marx's prophecy of the inevitable revolutionary overthrow of "unrestrained capitalism" presupposed that the "law of increasing misery" apply: that in search of additional profit, capitalists would increasingly exploit

1. He uses the phrase "a liberal theory" on OS, I, 111; for his argument as a historical analysis, see the paragraph following.

2. Popper presents the rationalist interpretation of history in note 61 to chap. 11, OS, II, 303.

3. W.W. Rostow, "The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto" (Cambridge University Press, paperback edition, 1960), p. 2.



the workers, finally beyond the latter's endurance. But Popper argues, increasing misery will only occur under <sup>un</sup>restrained capitalism, and the actual misery under historical capitalism was such that men chose not to allow it to increase to a revolutionary pitch. They chose to resort to interventionism after seeing the workings of "unlimited economic freedom".<sup>1</sup> Interventionism has led to decreasing misery. Thus Popper uses the concept of interventionism to show that the unrestrained capitalism on which Marx based the historical laws required for his prophecy, did not persist: the initial conditions of unrestrained capitalism, complete freedom of economic action, were abolished before their effects could, by means of the "law of increasing misery", lead to a revolutionary end of capitalism, and thus the revolutionary trend did not persist. Men chose to alter the initial conditions on which the persistence of the trend depended.

The debates discussed above, about the historical sequel to unrestrained capitalism and about the historical relations of liberalism and totalitarianism, rest on alternative and incompatible concepts of social analysis. It seems to me difficult if not impossible to apply Popper's description of historical interpretations as complementary and not incompatible to such intentionally antithetical analyses as those of Marx, Mannheim and Marcuse on one hand, and that of Popper on the other.

Moreover, Popper's defence of his notions of social policy by historical argument oversteps the limits he sets for historiography: because he is not giving history a meaning, but saying that history has a meaning which accords with his liberal ideas and undermines the Marxist analysis of capitalism.

1. OS, II, 178-9, on which this passage is based, and the citation taken.

## II. Social Policy: Piecemeal Engineering

### 1. Piecemeal and Utopian Social Engineering

Although interventionism remedied the inhumane effects of unrestrained capitalism, it is nonetheless inherently "dangerous", according to Popper, because it "will tend to increase the power of the state".<sup>1</sup> Hence the state-interference which is compatible with liberalism must be qualified: a liberal interventionism, in Popper's eyes, is one where piecemeal methods safeguard against the dangers of increasing state power.

Popper says at various points that the method of piecemeal social engineering is the only rational or practicable method of social reform: it is, as well, the only method which has "been really successful".<sup>2</sup> Popper delineates the method of piecemeal engineering by means of a series of contrasts with the objectionable form of social engineering which he calls Utopian or holistic. Utopian and piecemeal social engineering are thus correlative concepts in Popper's thought in a sense which is characteristic of his "critical approach" to ideas.<sup>3</sup>

Popper sometimes presents the outlook of social engineering in both its Utopian and its piecemeal forms, as antithetic to radical historicism,<sup>4</sup> because the latter counsels acquiescence in future developments which may be prophesied but which no human efforts can affect,<sup>5</sup> while social engineering is based on the premise that social changes can be achieved through human effort. But the "opposition"<sup>6</sup> between historicism and Utopian engineering

1. OS, II, 130.

2. PH, 69, OS, I, 167, OS, II, 238; PH, p.68; OS, I, 158.

3. Cf. the passage introducing section III of this chapter, p. ~~38~~<sup>274</sup> below.

4. OS, I, 22; PH, 44-45, PH 71 and PH 73; OS, I, 164. Cf. OS, I, 157 "The Utopian approach...may seem to be the obvious alternative to an out-and-out historicism - to a radically historicist approach which implies that we cannot alter the course of history; at the same time, it appears to be the necessary complement to a less radical historicism ...which permits human interference."

5. PH, 44-45.

6. PH 71.

turns out to be somewhat specious. Although historicism counsels acquiescence in the developmental laws of history, it need not require complete passivity of historicists.<sup>1</sup> According to a "less radical historicism", it is permissible for a historicist to act so as to promote what the alleged laws of history will in any case bring about, although he cannot by any means forestall their effects.<sup>2</sup> Despite the appeal of Utopian engineering to people "unaffected by or reacting against historicist prejudice", it is possible to combine Utopian engineering with "a less radical historicism...which permits human interference."<sup>3</sup>

This combination can occur because these two doctrines share certain assumptions which are rejected by piecemeal engineering. The Utopian engineer works with the idea of changing society as a whole, according to his blueprint; the historicist believes that the workings of the appropriate historical laws will result in a total transformation of society. By contrast, the piecemeal engineer maintains that social reforms must be based on experience which allows us to appraise the effects of measures implemented,<sup>4</sup> which cannot be done if the attempt is made to change society at one fell swoop.<sup>5</sup> Both the Utopian engineer and the historicist believe that the aims by which their social activities are guided "are not a matter of choice, or of moral decision; both hold that such aims can be "scientifically discovered" by analysing "historical tendencies" or the "'needs'" of society.<sup>6</sup> Thus the historicist argues that certain changes are inevitable results of the laws of history, and the Utopian maintains that large-scale planning is an inescapable consequence of the "direction of the present historical development".<sup>7</sup> The piecemeal engineer, and Popper, do not think that there can be scientific recipes for discovering social aims: such aims must be chosen;

1. PH 48-54 and 71.

2. OS, I, 157

3. OS, I, 158; PH 73; OS, I, 157. 4. PH, p.67.

5. The reasons for this contention are discussed below.

6. PH 74-75.

7. PH 75.



they cannot be supplied by any kind of allegedly scientific inquiry.<sup>1.</sup>

Another thread which links the historicist to the Utopian engineer is their common dissatisfaction with "tinkering" as a means of social reform and their desire to adopt more radical measures.<sup>2.</sup> A further point of agreement which Popper mentions is an application of holism: social experiments, "if there is such a thing", must be "carried out on a holistic scale", but

"We are seldom in the position to carry out 'planned experiments' in the social field...for an account of the results of 'chance experiments', so far carried out in this field, we have to turn to history." 3.

The doctrine that there are supra-individual entities or wholes in society, and the doctrine that social aims depend on the direction of society and can consequently be discovered by scientific investigation, doctrines which Popper names respectively holism and historicist moral theory, are common to historicism and Utopian engineering and are rejected by piecemeal engineering. They provide the basis for the "strange alliance"<sup>4.</sup> between the former two doctrines: an alliance wherein social policy is "sweeping" in the sense of dealing with supra-individual social wholes, in accordance with aims that are allegedly scientifically discovered.

1. Popper draws a strict distinction between the choice of such aims and their implementation by the social technologist (OS, chap. 3 sec. iv, OS, I, 22-24) The purpose of Popper's sharp distinction between the choice and the implementation of social aims is to allow for the analogy which he defends between piecemeal social engineering and mechanical engineering (see below p. 14-130, 234) Popper's figure of the technologist is not without its unsavoury connotations: a cog in the Nazi juggernaut such as Adolf Eichmann would seem to be a social technologist in Popper's sense (cf. OS, I, 23 "The social engineer or technologist...would perhaps suggest measures that would make (a police force) a suitable instrument for the protection of freedom and security, and he might also devise measures by which it could be turned into a powerful weapon of class rule".) Popper's model may give a rather misleading picture of the formulation of social aims, in which investigation is involved as well as, in the last resort, choice.

2. PH 74.

3. PH 84-85.

4. PH 73.

Although Popper characterizes Utopian or holistic<sup>1</sup> engineering as attempting to deal with social wholes or supra-individual social entities, the scope of holistic engineering, as contrasted with piecemeal engineering is nonetheless unclear. What exactly are Popper's objections to holistic engineering directed against? This question has interested commentators on Popper. Surely holistic planning must refer to more than the enterprise of changing a total society, an enterprise which is logically impossible to undertake if we follow Popper's argument than any particular has an infinity of aspects. Such engineering could never get off the ground, so to speak, for if a society has an infinity of aspects it is then impossible to act on all these aspects in any finite length of time. Yet what else can Popper refer to when he inveighs against the Utopian notion of "a blueprint for a society as a whole".<sup>2</sup>

Popper's criticism of the holistic characteristics of Utopian planning is not confined to the logical difficulty mentioned above. The notion of "a blueprint for society as a whole" derives from the attempt to realize an ideal society, whose features are delineated by such a blueprint.<sup>3</sup> Those who formulate such a dream are often "dissatisfied with 'piecemeal tinkering'".<sup>4</sup> Modifications of the status quo can never match their dream; for this a new world is needed. Popper describes this attitude as an "aesthetic enthusiasm" which is radical in the "original sense" of "going to the root of the matter".<sup>5</sup> But complete reconstruction starting from scratch is impossible:

"the social world must continue to function during any reconstruction" 6.

1. He seems to use these terms alternately, e.g. PH 67: "holistic or Utopian social engineering".

2. OS, I, 159

3. OS, I, 157-8

4. PH, 74. Might there be grounds other than an "understandable" "aesthetic enthusiasm" (OS, I, 165) for dissatisfaction with "'piecemeal tinkering'"? Popper does not go into this question to my satisfaction. I think (see below <sup>21, 22, 23, 24</sup> 21-24, 213, 214) there are reasons to be critical of what Popper recommends in the way of "'piecemeal tinkering'".

5. OS, I, 165 and OS, I, 164.

6. OS, I, 167.

Consequently the clean sweep which the Utopian engineer desires is quite impracticable. An even more important objection than the question of what happens in the interim is related to Popper's conception of the piecemeal method of reform: there can be no guarantee of success in implementing the ideal of "a complete reconstruction of our social world".<sup>1</sup> On the contrary: mistakes are to be expected, as we neither have nor can have any experience of such "sweeping changes" as "the reconstruction of society as a whole."<sup>2</sup>

So far Popper's strictures seem to be directed against Utopian dreams: against certain statements of principles rather than the actual proposals for social changes. The kind of planning which Popper thinks the Utopian attitude promotes is "large-scale" or centralized planning.<sup>3</sup> to which Popper raises rather different objections than that of the logical impossibility of transforming society in every detail, or the lack of an Archimedean lever<sup>4</sup> for shifting the social world. A related approach, on which several commentators have fastened as central to Popper's conception of holistic engineering, is planning which involves structural changes in society which Popper considers precipitate. Although Popper says that the piecemeal approach does not debar structural change in society on principle, if such changes are achieved gradually,<sup>5</sup> he attributes to holistic planning the ambition of "recast[ing] the whole structure of society"<sup>6</sup>. Although this aim need not involve the logical impossibility of changing every concrete detail of society within a finite span of time, immediate changes in the structure of society raise the problem of what is to be done while the structure of society is in the foundry. Commentators have thought that Popper's objections to "holistic" structural change have to do with more than the problem of management in the interim;<sup>7</sup> the tenor of Popper's views, some critics suggest, is against all structural change in

1. OS, I, 167.

2. OS, I, 167; OS, I, 161, I, 162.

3. PH 64 and 90

4. OS, I, 167

5. Cf. PH 68.

6. OS, I, 163.

7. e.g. Marcuse, op. cit.



society which is not accomplished quite gradually, as in the example he cites of changing the class structure of society as a result of piecemeal measures "inspired by...a tendency towards a greater equalization of incomes".<sup>1</sup> What piecemeal planning permits, then, is structural change over the long run; the caution of the piecemeal planner prohibits structural changes attempted in the short run.

A further objectionable attribute of holistic planning to be gleaned from Popper's presentation is that the success of its measures may require a transformation of human nature, to make human beings fit for the new society.<sup>2</sup> The Utopian's proposals for sweeping social reform often issue in the demand, not that the new society be made fit for man as he is, but that man be made fit for the new society. Popper's moral objection to this outcome is that transforming man is a euphemism for brainwashing and purges.<sup>3</sup> On the methodological side, Popper argues that the Utopian's demand that man be made fit for the new society is "an admission of failure", a renunciation of all claims to apply "a 'scientific' method" to social engineering: for objections to Utopian reforms requiring the transformation of man will be interpreted as indicating the unfitness of the objector for the new society rather than the unfitness of the new society, and:

"this, clearly, removes any possibility of testing the success or failure of the new society." 4.

If the Utopian's proposals require "'the transformation of man'", then they are unfalsifiable and they cannot be considered to be scientific.

In criticizing Utopian or holistic social engineering Popper rejects the claim he attributes to the Utopian, that holistic engineering is analogous to mechanical engineering. Popper contends that, upon examination, the analogy with mechanical engineering turns in favour of piecemeal methods

1. PH 68

2. PH 69-70.

3. OS, I, 166.

4. PH 70, cf. OS, I, 159-60: "the Utopian engineer will have to be deaf to many complaints."

of social engineering.<sup>1.</sup> That a mechanical engineer can plan to construct quite complicated devices from blueprints does not lend support to the Utopian's proposal to execute a complete social reconstruction from his blueprint. The mechanical engineer is able to plan his whole enterprise in advance "because he has sufficient experience at his disposal", experience garnered "by piecemeal methods" which the Utopian engineer's proposals lack.<sup>2.</sup> A series of piecemeal experiments precede the mechanical engineer's complicated blueprint; the antecedents of this blueprint are to be found in the experience of constructing simpler devices and adjusting them "by trial and error".<sup>3.</sup>

By contrast to the resources of the mechanical engineer, Popper argues that

"At present the sociological knowledge necessary for large-scale engineering is simply non-existent."<sup>4.</sup>

1. PH 84, PH 9293, Cf. OS, I, 163-4.

2. OS, I, 163.

3. OS, I, 163. Popper adds a further touch to the analogy with mechanical engineering which he thinks favours piecemeal methods. He suggests that unintended consequences also occur in mechanical engineering and that "the task of technology is here also largely to inform us about the unintended consequences of what we are doing." (a note added to later edits of OS, II, 324; note 11(2) to chap. 14). The example he gives in this connection, of a bridge becoming "too heavy if we strengthen certain of its components" is not however an unforeseeable consequence, but a consequence of a failure to consider available evidence. More generally, the unintended consequences which concern the piecemeal engineer and with which social theory is concerned, stem from the "uncertainty of the human factor" (see below) according to Popper, and there is nothing really analogous to this in mechanical engineering. Popper then gives a more general statement of this rather weak analogy:

"...the analogy goes even further. Our mechanical inventions do rarely turn out to our original plans."

This generalization might be disputed.

4. OS, I, 162: "We cannot possess such knowledge since we have insufficient practical experience in this kind of planning, and knowledge of facts must be based on experience." See below, pp. 262 for Popper's argument that we can never have the necessary experience for large-scale centralized planning.

Popper maintains that experience relevant to social reform, analogous to the backlog of experience which enables a mechanical engineer to construct a complicated device from a blueprint, must be gained by piecemeal methods: that is, by piecemeal social experiments, altering "one social institution at a time".<sup>1</sup> There are two insuperable drawbacks, Popper thinks, to the Utopian's proposal of holistic social experiments: to undertake large-scale enterprises, involving numerous factors, from the start. The Utopian engineer's enterprise is an experiment only in the sense that its

"outcome is uncertain, but not in the sense in which this term is used to denote a means of acquiring knowledge, by comparing the results obtained with the results expected." 1.

The Utopian engineer cannot

"disentangle causes and effects and know what he is really doing." 2.

"Since so much is done at a time, it is impossible to say which particular measure is responsible for any of the results; or rather, if we do attribute a certain result to a certain measure, then we can do so only on the basis of some theoretical knowledge gained previously, and not from the holistic experiment in question. This experiment does not help us to attribute particular results to particular measures; all we can do is to attribute the 'whole result' to it..." 3.

Consequently, unpleasant and unforeseen "repercussions" may and are likely to result from the Utopian's measures, "of a gravity that must endanger the will to future reforms."<sup>4</sup> With piecemeal experiments, both these related impasses can be avoided: it is possible to identify the results of piecemeal measures, and to control the scope of such unforeseen and unpleasant repercussions as may occur.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Popper maintains that only by adopting piecemeal methods can a social engineer undertake enterprises which are analogous to the scientific

1. PH, 85.

2. PH, 67.

3. PH, 88-89.

4. OS, I, 163.

5. Cf. OS, I, 163.



experiments on which the mechanical engineer's blueprints are based: for "the results obtained" can be compared with "the results expected" only if it is possible to identify the results of a particular social measure.

Popper has several stock examples of enterprises which he thinks can be considered to be social experiments, which he mentions in both The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society:

"A grocer who opens a new shop is conducting a social experiment; and even a man who joins a queue before a theatre gains experimental technological knowledge which he may utilize by having his seat reserved next time, which again is a social experiment. And we should not forget that only practical experiments have taught buyers and sellers on the markets the lesson that prices are liable to be lowered by every increase of supply, and raised by every increase of demand.

"Examples of piecemeal experiments on a somewhat larger scale would be the decision of a monopolist to change the price of his product; the introduction, whether by a private or a public insurance company, of a new type of health or employment insurance; or the introduction of a new sales tax, or of a policy to combat trade cycles. All these experiments are carried out with practical rather than scientific aims in view....The situation is very similar to that of physical engineering and to the pre-scientific methods by which our technological knowledge in matters such as the building of ships or the art of navigation was first acquired." 1.

"The introduction of a new kind of life-insurance, of a new kind of taxation, of a new penal reform, are all social experiments which have their repercussions through the whole of society without remodelling society as a whole. Even a man who opens a new shop, or who reserves a ticket for the theatre, is carrying out a kind of social experiment on a small scale; and all our knowledge of social conditions is based on experience gained by making experiments of this kind." 2.

Popper qualifies the extent to which enterprises such as he cites can be considered to be analogous to scientific experiments:

"...we possess a very great deal of experimental knowledge of social life....experience gained by efforts to achieve some practical aim. It must be admitted that the knowledge attained in this way is usually of a pre-scientific kind, and therefore more like knowledge gained by casual observation than knowledge gained by carefully designed scientific experiments; but there is no reason for denying that the knowledge in question is based on experiment rather than on mere observation." 1.

Popper's qualifications seems pretty damning, in the light of the distinction Popper drew earlier between the two kinds of predictions, technological and prophetic, and the engineering and prophetic character of the sciences in which these kinds of predictions figure:

"The distinction between these two sorts of prediction roughly coincides with the lesser or greater importance of the part played by designed experiment, as opposed to mere patient observation in the sciences concerned. The typical experimental sciences are capable of making technological predictions, while those employing non-experimental observations produce prophecies." 2.

But Popper does not think that the "pre-scientific and scientific experimental approaches" differ in principle:

"both approaches may be described, fundamentally, as utilizing the method of trial and error. We try; that is, we do not merely register an observation, but make active attempts to solve some more or less practical and definite problems. and we make progress if, and only if, we are prepared to learn from our mistakes: to recognize our errors and to utilize them critically instead of persevering in them dogmatically. Though this analysis may sound trivial, it describes, I believe, the method of all the empirical sciences." 3.

1. PH 85-6. The underlining is mine, not Popper's.

2. PH, 43. Cf. below, pp. ~~26-27~~ <sup>264-70</sup> for the implications of this weakness in the experimental basis of piecemeal engineering.

3. PH 87.

Thus Popper argues, perhaps somewhat dubiously, that piecemeal engineering is based on experimental knowledge gained by the same principles as the experimental knowledge on which mechanical engineering is based. On this point as before, the analogy with mechanical engineering allegedly favours piecemeal and not Utopian engineering.

Although Popper seems to think that piecemeal methods show up the defects inherent in many holistic proposals for large-scale planning, even conscientious resort to the piecemeal approach will not remove all the obstacles in the way of large-scale planning. "The sociological knowledge necessary for large-scale engineering" does not exist,<sup>1</sup> and Popper thinks in an important sense cannot exist. There are indeterminacies in social life which cannot be surmounted by any amount of piecemeal engineering. While it is possible for a single mechanical engineer to collect all the relevant information for his task, it is not possible for the social engineer to do the same,<sup>2</sup> for he cannot determine in advance what "the uncertainty of the human factor" which affects all his plans will lead to. Hence the possibility of unforeseeable consequences can never be eliminated from social engineering of either sort; and Popper argues that unforeseen and unpleasant consequences can be successfully alleviated only if piecemeal methods of social engineering are adopted.

Popper argues that holistic social engineering is impossible, not only because it is logically impossible to control all aspects of a whole, but also because "in practice" the characteristic features of social life, unforeseen consequences, due to the "uncertain and wayward" "human factor",

"force upon the holistic engineer the expedient of piecemeal improvisation". 2.

To compensate for the unpleasant and unexpected results of his plan, which may endanger its realization, the holistic engineer will be obliged to

"fall back on a somewhat haphazard and clumsy although ambitious and ruthless application of what is essentially a piecemeal method without its cautious and self-critical character." 3.

1. OS, I, 162

2. PH, 68-9 and PH, 158

3. PH, 68.



## 2. Criticisms of Popper's Distinction

### Between Holistic and Piecemeal Social Engineering.

Several critics have argued that the contrasts which Popper draws between piecemeal and holistic social engineering do not stand up to examination: that insofar as the holistic engineer is not a phantasm, there is little or nothing in the way of a firm distinction between his approach and that of the piecemeal engineer.<sup>1.</sup>

Popper, in defending piecemeal engineering against those radicals "in the original and literal sense" who find "'social tinkering'" tedious and ineffective, argues that there are "no limits to the scope of a piecemeal approach."<sup>2.</sup> The piecemeal engineer may have long-term ends in view:<sup>3.</sup>

"a series of piecemeal reforms may be inspired by one general tendency, for example, a tendency towards a greater equalization of incomes. In this way piecemeal methods may lead to changes in what is usually called the 'class structure of society'". 4.

Popper argues for a fundamental distinction between piecemeal and Utopian engineering, not by attempting "to draw a precise line of demarcation between the two methods", but by characterizing the different attitudes with which the respective species of engineers approach social reform. Both the piecemeal engineer and the Utopian may have the same ends in view, but the ways in which they seek to implement these ends are markedly different.<sup>5.</sup> The piecemeal planner is "cautious".<sup>6.</sup> He does not undertake measures that will not allow him to check and compensate for such unforeseen and unpleasant consequences as may always occur, and he does not allow what may

1. E.g. A. Marfiro, "Can We Plan for Social Progress?", Mind, N.S. v.57 (1948), pp. 341-9, and Russell Price, "Holistic and Piecemeal Social Engineering," Political Science, v. 12(1960), 151-7.

2. PH, 68, OS, I, 64.

3. Cf. OS, I, 158

4. PH, 68

5. PH, 68

6. PH, 68.

seem to be positive benefits of any proposed reform to override the fundamental criterion of not causing harm to the individuals affected. If the piecemeal planner is not limited as to the scope of the reforms that he can undertake, he is limited in the speed at which he can accomplish large-scale reforms, due to these two fundamental considerations. Whereas holistic planning, according to Popper seeks to make an immediate clean sweep in pursuit of its aims, piecemeal planning must achieve its ends gradually: because, according to Popper, the fundamental problems for social policy as well as for social theory, stem from the occurrence of unintended and unforeseeable consequences, due to the "uncertainty of the human factor".<sup>1</sup> And secondly, because all social policies must meet the fundamental criterion of negative utilitarianism, which is that the aim of social reform is to eliminate suffering rather than to attempt to distribute happiness: thus no measure is permissible which creates benefits at the expense of causing suffering.

Critics have argued, further, that piecemeal planning nonetheless seems to merge with holistic planning on a point related to the question of scope. Popper allows that

"when trying to assess the likely consequences of some proposed reform, the piecemeal technologist must do his best to estimate the effects of any measure upon the 'whole' of society." 2.

Popper's choice of phrase here may be in part a rhetorical prelude to his argument that the approach of piecemeal planning does differ from that of holistic engineering. Another statement of the same point qualifies the sense in which piecemeal planning is holistic. Piecemeal experiments may

"have their repercussions through the whole of society without remodelling society as a whole." 3.

Thus it seems that however "holistic" the effects of piecemeal engineering may be throughout society, it is not the "impossible method"<sup>4</sup> that Popper attributes to Utopian engineering: of attempting to encompass everything about a concrete particular, namely a particular society. Nor, by stipulation, does it suffer from the practical impossibility that Popper thinks characterizes holistic engineering: of being so swamped by unforeseen and

1. Cf. OS, II, 94, and CR, 124-5 and CR, 342. 2. PH, 68. 3. OS, I, 162.

4. PH, 79.

unpleasant repercussions from its measures that the Utopian engineer is obliged to fall back upon piecemeal methods.

Popper's statements about the possible holistic effects of piecemeal measures yield the conclusion that Popper's concept of holism suffers from <sup>the</sup> "fundamental ambiguity" that he attributes to the holists' usage of whole.<sup>1.</sup> According to Popper, the Utopian planner holds the view that a whole society can be planned in every detail. But no activity or knowledge can exhaust all aspects of any totality or concrete particular. Thus all knowledge about, or activity on, a whole must be selective, and it is consequently logically impossible to plan to control a society as a totality. All social planning must deal with selected aspects of social life; a total society cannot be planned. But Popper also uses holistic planning, by contrast with piecemeal planning, in a sense that does not involve changing a society in total: namely to refer to "large-scale planning" which neglects the criteria which Popper thinks are sine quibus non for all social planning - attention to unintended consequences, and to the right of individuals not to be harmed for social considerations.

Popper also objects, on moral and methodological grounds, to the "'transformation of man'", which he thinks is involved in Utopian engineering as represented by Karl Mannheim.<sup>2.</sup> Although Popper derives the Utopian's need to modify human nature, in order to implement his proposals for reforms, from the Utopian's failure to allow for "the uncertainty of the human factor"<sup>3.</sup> around which Popper's piecemeal methods of social engineering revolve, it has been suggested that some of Popper's criteria for suitable piecemeal reforms would have the same implication: for such reforms to be realized would also require that human nature be changed.

A. Mardiros has argued that although Popper might sanction slum clearance as an instance of piecemeal engineering, if "slum clearance is successful

1. PH, 76-83.

2. PH, 69-70 and OS, I, 165-66. Cf. p. # 257 above.

3. PH, 69. Which is also Popper's major criticism of methodological psychologism, in his argument for methodological individualism, discussed below, p. ~~43-44~~  
286-287



in its aims" it will involve more than "changing material conditions":

"We also aim at removing child delinquency, gangsterism, alcoholism, etc; and in changing the material conditions we aim at changing the people concerned, and the material conditions must be planned with these other changes in mind." 1.

Consequently Mardiros suggests that it would be misplaced for a critic to object that such a plan for slum clearance cannot be tested because it has "changed the people and made them fit in with the plan".<sup>2</sup>.

Another example, which may be more apposite to the question of the admissibility of reforms that require that human nature be changed, is one that Mardiros cites against Popper's proposal that social problems be tackled by "individual piecemeal reforms". The nineteenth century abolition of slavery was "stultified", Mardiros argues, "because it was treated as [an] isolated problem" - the erstwhile slaves were simply set free when "large-scale" and inter-connected measures were needed:

"It needed no experiments to establish the fact that what was also required was the education, technical training and establishment of the former slaves as free and equal citizens in fact as well as in law and that this could only be done as part of a large-scale and many-sided plan." 3.

1. Mardiros, "Can We Plan for Social Progress," Mind NS v. 57(1948) pp. 343-4.

2. Mardiros' exposition of this example seems to me rather paternalistic in tone. Mardiros also considers penal reform in connection with whether reforms which involve changing human nature must be rejected as unscientific:

"If we change the character of the penal institution this means bringing about a change in the administrators, in the warders, and in the prisoners, and if there is no such change there is little point in the reform." (344).

3. Mardiros, p. 342.

More can be said: to realize the abolition of slavery, a transformation of human nature is needed, both of the former slave-owners and of the former slaves, and the additional measures which Mardiros mentions are largely educational measures directed to this end. More generally, to remove suffering - the common purpose of social reforms sanctioned by negative utilitarianism<sup>1</sup> - due to socially enrooted prejudices about, e.g. race or sex, may require transformations of human nature in order to be realized.

If Popper's piecemeal methods of reform are to be distinguished from those which he attributes to the Utopian engineer, with regard to what they require of human nature, then certain, perhaps rather peculiar distinctions need to be made as to what transformations of human nature are permissible. Is it permissible to transform men by piecemeal measures, or by re-education, out of prejudices which go against humanitarian or egalitarian measures such as Popper recommends, when these prejudices impede such reforms, even pursued by piecemeal methods? If there are difficulties in realizing equal rights in a society, due to racial prejudice, would Popper's contrast between holistic and piecemeal planning allow for attempts to reduce or eliminate such prejudice by education - a difficult, but not, I hope, an impossible suggestion - or would this amount to an impermissible transformation of human nature?

Thus morasses have been discovered in Popper's attempt to distinguish piecemeal from Utopian engineering by attributing a holistic scope, and the need to mould men to fit its reforms, solely to the latter. Both the concept of holism, and that of transforming man are ambiguous, and Popper does not pay sufficient attention to the effects which these ambiguities have on his own principles for acceptable social reforms: the ambiguity of holism is a fundamental weakness in Popper's characterization of Utopian planning by contrasts with piecemeal engineering; and Popper's failure to see how transformations of human nature may be required for reforms other than those he stigmatizes as Utopian suggests he has not thoroughly considered the obstacles

1. On negative utilitarianism, see below, p. ~~270~~ 270-272

to social reform in general and to his own piecemeal methods of reform in particular.

Objections have also been lodged against some of the arguments by which Popper attempts to show that the analogy with mechanical engineering, which gives grounds for describing social planning as engineering, favours piecemeal and not Utopian planning. Richard Rhees has argued that the two ill-synthesized components of Popper's theory of institutions - norms and sociological laws of the order of natural laws<sup>1</sup> - do not do as much to support the analogy between mechanical engineering and piecemeal social engineering as Popper's use of this analogy requires. In particular, Rhees says that Popper needs to view social institutions as norms or conventions which depend on us, in order to rebut the rejection of the notion of social engineering as unsound

"on the ground that the 'engineer' must be subject to the influence he is trying to control." 2.

However, the resulting analogy between our making normative laws or institutions and making machines is, Rhees observes, "rather thin" 3.

As for the claim that both piecemeal and mechanical engineering employ "the technological approach" in the sense of being based on experiments,<sup>4</sup> Popper himself acknowledges some of the limitations of his concept of piecemeal social experiments, by admitting that they provide pre-scientific rather than scientific knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is not clear that piece-

1. OS, I, 67-68.      2. Rhees, "Social Engineering, Mind, N.S. v. 56(1947), 320.

3. Rhees, p. 321. As for Popper's "main view" that social institutions are instruments, Rhees contends that

"the contrast between the work a machine does and the influence of a social institution is really greater than the analogy." (p.323)

There is also the difficulty of identifying who are the editorial we, who use social institutions as instruments to serve our chosen ends.

4. PH, 43 58 ff. Both Richard Rhees (op. cit., p. 329) and Anthony Mardiros (op. cit., p. 342) have criticized Popper's conception of piecemeal social experiments.

5. PH, 85-87.



meal social experiments are in fact technological in the sense in which Popper uses this term to distinguish between engineering and prophetic sciences. This distinction turns, as was noted above, on

"the lesser or greater importance of the part played by designed experiment, as opposed to mere patient observation, in the science concerned. The typical experimental sciences are capable of making technological predictions, while those employing mainly non-experimental observations produce prophecies." 1.

The "pre-scientific kind" of knowledge from piecemeal social experiments is

"more like knowledge gained by casual observation than knowledge gained by carefully designed scientific experiments" 2.

even though it is

"gained not merely through observation...but by efforts to achieve some practical aim." 3.

The observational character of the knowledge which can be acquired from what Popper considers social experiments would seem, if we adhere to Popper's earlier distinction, to limit the extent to which social engineering can be said to be technological. Experimental knowledge of the piecemeal kind would appear to sanction rule-of-thumb reforms rather than planned reforms; the limitations of experimental knowledge of social life would seem to impede social planning from ever becoming fully scientific, and this conclusion corroborates Popper's view that social engineering must never lose its caution, or be more than gradual. Thus the analogy with mechanical engineering is limited because Popper's concept of social experiment seems to require that piecemeal engineering remain at a pre-scientific stage: because of the character of our experimental knowledge of society, caution must substitute for the engineer's blueprint.

What remains for a distinction between piecemeal and Utopian planning derives from Popper's moral emphasis on the rights of the individual. The speed at which piecemeal planning can achieve reforms of whatever scope is limited by the necessity of attending to unforeseeable repercussions affect-

1. See above, p. 146

2. PH, 85

3. PH, 85.

ing the individuals concerned. No plan can incorporate all the reactions from the individuals whom it affects, because of the inexhaustibility of concrete particulars such as individuals<sup>1</sup>, and the consequent impossibility of taking account of, much less centralizing, everything relevant to the impact of a measure upon the individuals concerned. Thus the piecemeal planner is required to proceed at a pace which allows him to repair or compensate for possible harm to individuals. Hence Popper's view that social reforms require piecemeal planning is shaped by his individualism, through his insistence on the likelihood of "unintended consequences" due to "the uncertainty of the human factor", and through his adherence to the principle of negative utilitarianism.

Popper calls his fundamental maxim negative utilitarianism: that the social engineer should "formulate" his "demands negatively" and seek to diminish suffering.<sup>2</sup> As a corollary, Popper argues that "the 'higher' values should...be left to the realm of laissez-faire"; the attempt to promote happiness "seems to be apt to produce a benevolent dictatorship."<sup>3</sup>

Popper's chief argument for the maxim that he calls negative utilitarianism rests on the incommensurability of pain and pleasure: no pleasure can compensate for, or be balanced against any pain. Thus the standard utilitarian

1. PH, 77-8; OS, II, 245:

"For it is the particular, the unique and concrete individual, which cannot be approached by rational methods, and not the abstract universal. Science can describe general types of landscape, for example, or of man, but it can never exhaust one single individual landscape, or of one single man....the unique individual and his unique actions and experiences and relations to other individuals can never be fully rationalized."

2. On negative utilitarianism: OS, I, 235, note 6(2) to chap. 5; OS, I, 284-5, note 2 to chap. 9; OS, II, 235; OS, II, 237; OS, II, 304, note 62 to chap. 11; OS, II, 386; "Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences", CR. p. 345.

3. OS, II, 237; OS, II, 235.

principle<sup>1</sup> of promoting general happiness on the whole is sadly incomplete, for it neglects to consider what might ensue from such measures in the way of pains for which no pleasure could compensate. The conclusion seems inescapable that there is an irreparable flaw in social policies concerned solely with positive benefits. Consequently Popper argues that the fundamental maxim of any social policy must be to foster social welfare by decreasing suffering as equitably as possible.<sup>2</sup>

"It adds to clarity in the field of ethics if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than promotion of happiness." 3.

The analogy with Popper's "view of scientific methodology"<sup>4</sup> is clear: just as repeated verifications can never establish the soundness of a scientific theory, so there is no guarantee that increasing positive benefits will actually add to social welfare. In the one case, the possibility

1. But as H.B. Acton has pointed out ("Negative Utilitarianism," ASSV, XXXVII (1963), p. 84), Popper is not defending a utilitarian theory at all. On negative utilitarianism, R.N. Smart argues ("Negative Utilitarianism", Mind, N.S. vol. 67(1958), pp. 542-3) that negative utilitarianism as a criterion can be shown to yield absurd results in certain extreme but not impossible cases. J.W.N. Watkins, "Negative Utilitarianism," ASSV, XXXVII(1963), 95-114) argues for negative utilitarianism as part of a wider moral negativism.

Popper has acknowledged Smart's criticisms in his Addendum (1961) to The Open Society:

"The maximization of happiness may have been intended as a criterion. On the other hand I certainly never recommended that we adopt the minimization of misery as a criterion, although I think it is an improvement on some of the ideas of utilitarianism. I also suggested that the reduction of avoidable misery belongs to the agenda of public policy (which does not mean that any question of public policy is to be decided by a calculus of minimizing misery) while the maximization of one's happiness should be left to one's private endeavour. (I quite agree with those critics of mine who have shown that if used as a criterion, the minimum misery principle would have absurd consequences; and I expect that the same may be said about any other moral criterion)" OS, II, 386.

2. OS, I, 284-5, note 2 to chap. 9.      3. OS, I, 285, note 2 to chap. 9.

4. OS, I, 285, note 2 to chap. 9.



that a scientific theory may be falsified is overlooked, and in the other, the possibility that suffering may be increased and not diminished by distributing positive benefits is neglected.

Popper also argues, in support of negative utilitarianism, that it is easier to agree on social evils and on how to remove them, than it is to agree on social ideals and how to realize them. It is certainly true that it is easier to locate actual suffering than pie-in-the-sky, but it is not necessarily the case that it will be easy to persuade representatives of vested interests to acknowledge suffering which goes against their interests, nor will it be easy to reach agreement where such vested interests are concerned on the way to remove suffering. Popper's claim that the fight against suffering is more likely to gain support than the fight to realize some ideal is not borne out by historical evidence. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when Great Britain could with some justice be characterized as two nations, evidence of the poverty of the labouring population was considered by many of the well-to-do as evidence of their profligacy. Thus although reasonable agreement may be possible on the existence of social suffering, it may not in practice be easy or even possible to reach agreement about such suffering; it may be extremely difficult, or near impossible to reach the starting point of social reforms to be implemented under the aegis of negative utilitarianism. Consequently there would seem to be a considerable practical difficulty in the way of applying negative utilitarianism as a maxim in social policy; it may not be as practicable a maxim for social engineering as Popper assumes. As was noted above,<sup>1</sup> Popper does not always take sufficient notice of the obstacles in the way of applying his notions of social reform.

1. p. <sup>2613</sup>~~2423~~ above.

## II, 3. Piecemeal Engineering and Empirical Social Science.

Popper maintains that the implications of piecemeal planning go beyond issues of social policy: systematic piecemeal engineering is prerequisite for empirical social science. Popper rejects the argument, which he attributes to the sociology of knowledge, that the connection of "social and political knowledge" with practical problems

"creates the methodological difficulties" 1.

of the social sciences. On the contrary, the piecemeal social engineering which Popper recommends for solving practical problems is also, he claims, the only solution for the "methodological difficulties" of the social sciences:

"systematic piecemeal engineering will help us to build up an empirical social technology, arrived at by the method of trial and error. Only in this way can we begin to build up an empirical social science....such a social science hardly exists so far, and...the historical method is incapable of furthering it much." 2.

Popper rests his case on the analogy he draws between the "technological" approach of piecemeal planning and the methods of the natural sciences. Popper has argued that empirical knowledge is synonymous with "the method of trial and error": that is, the method of proposing and testing hypotheses; and Popper maintains that social experiments for testing hypotheses about social life require piecemeal methods.

It was suggested above that the concept of social experiment which Popper delineates may be too fragile to support the analogy he wants to draw between piecemeal engineering and the methods of the natural sciences, via mechanical engineering.<sup>3</sup> There are, however, other implications of Popper's choice of basis for an empirical social science, which are relevant to the argument of this chapter. The precarious basis in social experiments is not the only attribute of piecemeal engineering which may be carried over to

1. OS, II, 222, conclusion of chapter 23.

2. OS, I, 291, note 8 to chapter 9.

3. pp. ~~187-188~~ <sup>187-188</sup> and ~~257-258~~ <sup>257-258</sup> above.  
261-2 and 268-9

"an empirical social science" built up by piecemeal engineering.

It was argued above that the distinctive features of piecemeal planning derive from Popper's individualism: the maxim of negative utilitarianism as well as the importance which Popper thinks unforeseen consequences, arising from "the uncertainty of the human factor" have for the approach which social reform must adopt.<sup>1</sup> It is because Popper's individualism underlies his advocacy of a piecemeal approach in both social policy and social science, that his ideas about the methods of the social sciences are marked by his liberalism. Popper's defence of several variants of individualism which I consider in the next section of this chapter, shapes his ideas on history in a liberal direction as well. It is because Popper makes the gratuitous assumption that political individualism and the rejection of political collectivism require rejecting methodological holism and supporting methodological individualism, that his political opinions influence his methodological ideas and thence, the application of the latter to historiography.

### III. Popper's Arguments for Methodological Individualism; Methodological Individualism in Practice

Previous chapters have shown that it is often the case that Popper's positive proposals are best considered as replacements of doctrines that he criticizes; and conversely, that what he criticizes can be most clearly presented by investigating the alternative which he recommends. Popper's positive proposals and his critical targets are thus often correlative concepts. Moreover, it is frequently the case that Popper's positive doctrines are the residue, left after what Popper opposes has been eliminated.

Popper takes the "critical approach" just described in his treatment of individualisms, political, methodological and ontological. What Popper

1. p. ~~262~~<sup>269-270</sup> above.



defends as these individualisms emerges from his criticism of the corresponding doctrines that he attributes to holism. Popper's characteristic approach, which he calls critical, might also be described as a dialectical treatment of ideas, as can be seen from his presentation of methodological individualism.

He first opposes methodological individualism, the view that social collectives such as states or institutions must be analysed "in individualistic terms,"<sup>1</sup> to methodological collectivism, the view that such collectives are "not analysable in terms of individuals, their relations, and their actions."<sup>2</sup> Popper then disengages methodological individualism from psychologism, the view

"that the choice of such an individualistic method implies the choice of a psychological method." 3.

Methodological individualism, as Popper defends it, is opposed to the cluster of related doctrines which Popper variously describes as methodological collectivism, methodological essentialism, and holism;<sup>4</sup> and it is free from what Popper calls psychologism. The three terms in Popper's development of methodological individualism, the opponent of methodological collectivism, the mistaken individualistic view of methodological psychologism and the well-grounded doctrine of methodological individualism, thus provide a thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

Before examining Popper's several statements of methodological individualism, and his defence of this view, it will be useful to set out the three kinds of individualisms and corresponding holisms, and to consider the logical relations which hold between these doctrines. Individualism and holism may each provide an ontology, a methodology, or a political theory: that is,

1. About which a good deal more will be said later, p. <sup>251-2</sup>~~384~~ <sup>258</sup>~~45~~
2. OS, II, 323-4; cf. OS, II, 91.
3. OS, II, 91, cf. OS, II, 98 and PH 142.
4. methodological collectivism: OS, II, 91, OS, II, 226 and OS, II, 323-4, addit. to note 11, chap. 14; methodological essentialism, PH, 136; holism as well as methodological essentialism is implied by the statements, PH, 140.

assertions may be made as to the "ultimate constituents of the social world"<sup>1</sup>, or about the standards which adequate social analysis must meet, or indications may be given of the considerations by which political action ought to be guided. The crucial point in what follows is the extent to which the political and ontological doctrines of holism and individualism are involved in the respective methodological doctrines.

Ontological individualism is the view that no collective social entities exist, in any sense comparable to that in which human individuals exist; that, in other words, individual human beings are the only "ultimate constituents of the social world".<sup>2</sup> Ontological holism holds that collectives may be said to exist in a sense equally as strong, if not stronger, as that in which human individuals are said to exist: the "ultimate constituents of the social world" include more than individual human beings.

Political holism may be considered a neologism for doctrines previously known as organic theories of politics, which are linked with organic theories of society.<sup>3</sup> Political holism holds that the political rights of collective entities, such as states or nations, may override those of individuals; thus, social policies may justly be guided by the needs of the state or the nation, even at the expense of many or most of the individuals in the domain of these entities. Political individualism asserts that, in Popper's words,

"human individuals must be recognized to be the ultimate concern...of all politics." 4.

1. J.W.N. Watkins, "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences, BJPS, v. 8 (1957), p. 106. W.H. Dray, "Holism and Individualism in History and Social Science", Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. P. Edwards, IV, 53-58, also makes use of this phrase, e.g. p. 55.

2. Popper says that terms for social collectives refer, not to "concrete things" but to theoretical models (PH, 135-6). In a thesis written under Popper's direction (D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Individuals and Societies: a methodological inquiry, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1967), the author maintains that social wholes do exist, but not in the same sense that individuals exist. See below p. ~~58~~ 293-4

3. Which Morris Ginsberg describes as "sociological holism", "The Individual and Society", On the Diversity of Morals, Essays in Sociology and Social Philosophy, v. 1 (1956), p. 150. Ontological holism, in other words.

4. OS, I, 288-9, note 7 to chapter 9.

This passage might be construed in the light of the classical political theory of individualism: that social welfare is best promoted by the unrestricted actions of individuals.<sup>1</sup> But Popper, as his discussion of interventionism shows, recognizes the weaknesses of this policy. Political individualism, as Popper defends it, asserts that the individuals in a society have certain rights which cannot be overridden for the sake of any social collectives: although a citizen may have certain obligations, such as defending his state in wartime, or supporting the government from his taxes, political demands on the citizen cannot infringe upon his right not to be made to suffer unnecessarily or inequitably.

Methodological individualism lays down certain standards for adequate social analysis: that social collectives such as nations or states, as well as institutions such as banks or universities, must be analysed in "individualistic terms"; that what such terms describe must be reduced to the actions and interactions of individuals. Holism, as a strictly methodological doctrine, is less stringent than methodological individualism in its standards for adequate social analysis. Methodological holism is sometimes now defended as a kind of agnosticism. Methodological holists

"are most concerned to uphold...the logical respectability of using holistic collective concepts and macroscopic laws, if need be.... what they resist is the conclusion a priori that we can realize the ideal, and the associated temptation to refuse anything less." 2.

It is clearly possible to combine methodological holism, as described above, with both ontological and political individualism. One may hold that the ultimate constituents of the social world are individuals alone, and that political action should not be guided by considerations relating to social collectives at the expense of individuals, without being committed to the view

1. Which D.P. Chattopadhyaya calls "ideological individualism", and he says quite correctly (p.170) that "there is no necessary connection" between laissez-faire and methodological individualism.

2. Dray, op. cit., p. 58.



that social analysis must meet the requirements of methodological individualism. This is in fact the position of some contemporary methodological holists such as Maurice Mandelbaum, who have formulated their views in debate with methodological individualists.<sup>1</sup>

It is also possible to be a methodological individualist without being committed to political individualism. Hobbes has been suggested in this connection as an example of a methodological individualist for his recommendation of atomistic analysis, and a political holist for his theory of the Leviathan state.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the logical relations which have been considered between the various kinds of holisms and individualisms show that methodological individualism cannot be established solely by considerations to do with either political or ontological individualism. What appears to be a truism deserves some emphasis: to establish methodological individualism, if indeed this can be done, requires methodological considerations; political and ontological considerations will not suffice.

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The critique of holism and associated doctrines is central in Popper's attack on historicism, and occupies a commensurate proportion of Popper's pages on historicism. Popper's defense of methodological individualism, and more fundamentally, of a political individualism with an admixture of ontological considerations, is the standpoint from which he criticizes the holist family of doctrines. Nonetheless, the brevity of Popper's treatment of the methodological doctrines of individualism seems somewhat at odds with his claim that he has refuted and replaced the historicist methodology.<sup>3</sup> insofar as this latter methodology involves holism: for one would like

1. Dray, op. cit. p.53.

2. Dray, op. cit. p.53. Of course, Hobbes argues for these two contentions on quite different grounds.

3. PH, 57ff and PH, 136.

to know more than Popper says about the methodological individualism which "destroys" the doctrines of methodological essentialism.<sup>1</sup>

Popper's presentation of methodological individualism takes what has been described above as a dialectical form. Popper first presents methodological individualism as opposed to methodological collectivism and methodological essentialism: opposed, that is, methodological doctrines based on holism. But what Popper understands by and defends as methodological individualism does not emerge immediately from the confrontation with methodological holism, for there is also a psychologist variant of individualism which Popper thinks untenable on several counts in spite of

"the great merits which psychologism has acquired by advocating a methodological individualism and by opposing a methodological collectivism." 2.

Popper's presentation of the holistic doctrines of collectivism and methodological essentialism, in opposition to which he proposes methodological individualism, does not cover all the positions which a methodological holist may defend and a methodological individualist will reject. In Popper's usage, collectivism refers to

"a doctrine which emphasizes the significance of some collective or group, for instance 'the state' (or a certain state; or a nation; or a class) as against that of the individual." 3.

Or even more strongly, collectivism

"emphasize[s] the significance of some group or collective - for example - without which the individual is nothing at all." 4.

1. PH, 136. 2. OS, II, 98. 3. OS, I, 203, note 1 to chapter 1.

4. OS, I, 9. Cf. OS, I, 80 for a characterization of Plato's holism which Popper thinks "is closely related" to the collectivism characterized in the passage just cited:

"Only a stable whole, the permanent collective, has reality, not the passing individuals. It is 'natural' for the individual to subserve the whole, which is no mere assembly of individuals, but a 'natural' unit of a higher order."

Popper states quite explicitly that he uses "the term 'individualism'" "in opposition to collectivism".<sup>1</sup> Thus

"'methodological individualism', as opposed to 'methodological collectivism'...insists that the 'behaviour' and the 'actions' of collectives, such as states or social groups, must be reduced to the behaviour and to the actions of individuals." 2.

Popper's presentation of collectivism is exaggerated but not exhaustive:

"Hegel and Hegelians are collectivists. They argue that, since we owe our reason to 'society' - or to a certain society such as a nation - 'society' is everything and the individual nothing; or that whatever value the individual possesses is derived from the collective, the real carrier of all values. As opposed to this, the position presented here does not assume the existence of collectives; if I say, for example, that we owe our reason to 'society', then I always mean that we owe it to certain concrete individuals - though perhaps to a considerable number of anonymous individuals - and to our intellectual intercourse with them. Therefore, in speaking of a 'social' theory of reason (or of scientific method) I mean more precisely that the theory is an inter-personal one, and never that it is a collective one." 3.

It is possible to be a holist without subscribing to the extreme view that the individual owes everything to the collective: a holist may maintain that both individuals and societal collectives can make irreducible contributions to the fabric of social life; he is not committed to the view that the only agents in social life are collectives. Individuals and collectives may thus be seen as symbiotic; neither depending wholly on the other for their existence or their activities, but intimately related and mutually dependent.

Moreover, it is not necessary to commit the logical error which Popper stigmatizes as holism in The Poverty of Historicism;<sup>4</sup> if one wishes to uphold methodological holism. One may argue for the logical admissibility of

1. OS, I, 100.

2. OS, II, 91.

3. OS, II, 226.

4. PH, 76-79.



societal concepts or societal laws in social analysis, without being committed to the view that such holistic concepts as social analysis may use include every concrete detail of their referents.

Thus Popper's statements of the methodological holism to which methodological individualism is opposed, require some qualifications: for Popper has not exhausted, nor even adequately described the position of methodological holism. Nonetheless, the limited analysis he gives of methodological holism is, I think, presupposed in his statements of methodological individualism:

"...most of the objects of social science, if not all of them, are abstract objects; they are theoretical constructions. (Even 'the war' or 'the army' are abstract concepts, strange as this may sound to some. What is concrete is the many who are killed; of the men and women in uniform, etc.) These objects, these theoretical constructions used to interpret our experience, are the result of constructing certain models (especially of institutions) in order to explain certain experiences....Very often we are unaware of the fact that we are operating with hypotheses or theories, and we therefore mistake our theoretical models for concrete things....The fact that models are often used in this way explains - and by so doing destroys - the doctrines of methodological essentialism....it destroys them because the task of social theory is to construct and to analyse our sociological models carefully in descriptive or nominalist terms, that is to say, in terms of individuals, of their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc. - a postulate which may be called 'methodological individualism'". 1.

In a subsequent statement of methodological individualism, added to later editions of The Open Society, Popper indicates a point of "considerable disagreement" between his and Marx's methodological views, about the proper way in which unintended consequences, which Popper considers central to social policy and sociological theory, are to be analysed. Methodological collectivism, as represented by Marx, explains unintended consequences, which Popper thinks result from actions undertaken by individuals, in terms of the workings of irreducibly collective constituents of society,

such as the "'means of production'" which are

"not analysable in terms of individuals, their relations, and their actions. As opposed to this, I hold that institutions (and traditions) must be analysed in individualistic terms - that is to say, in terms of the relations of individuals acting in certain situations, and of the unintended consequences of their actions." 1.

It is worth noting that Popper has altered his statement of methodological individualism to include "situations" among the "individualistic terms" of social analysis. Later defenders of methodological individualism have used the concept of situation to argue that certain examples, proposed by methodological holists, are not beyond analysis by methodological individualism or "'situationalism'". 2.

Methodological individualism does not, in Popper's opinion, require "the adoption of a psychological method"<sup>3</sup>, and the adoption of such a method,

1. OS, II, 323-4, addition to note 11 to chap. 14.

2. For D.P. Chattopadhyaya's defence of situational individualism, see below, pp. ~~294~~ 294-5

Although Watkins sometimes seemed in his earlier discussions of methodological individualism to fall into psychologism ("Ideal Types and Historical Explanation," BJPS, v. 3, pp. 28-9, 34), some of his later statements run more in the vein of situationalism (e.g. "Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences," BJPS, v. 8): methodological individualism is the principle that:

"the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situations." (105-6)

"The explanation (of regularities of social life) should be in terms of individuals and their situations." 115

Agassi also thinks of Popper's methodological individualism as situational logic in effect ("Methodological Individualism", British Journal of Sociology, v. 11 (1960), p. 264).

Situational individualism may be viewed in the light of what Dray (op. cit. p. 58) says about the rapprochement of methodological individualists and holists:

"many methodological individualists appear to retreat under pressure" to "the much weaker demand that an acceptable explanation employ concepts which can be attributed to an individual, or jointly to a group of them."

3. PH, 142: Cf. OS, II, 91, 98.

in conjunction with individualism, leads to quite mistaken results. In Popper's opinion, the most important objection against psychologism is that

"it fails to understand the main task of the explanatory social sciences." 1.

which is

"the task of analysing the unintended social repercussions of intentional human action." 2.

But that

"psychologism is forced to operate with the idea of a psychological origin of society."

is also "a decisive argument against it."<sup>3</sup> These two criticisms are interconnected: the methodological myth of the "psychological origin of society" results from psychologism's failure to take account of unintended consequences.

An individualism which requires that "all social phenomena" be reduced "to psychological phenomena and psychological laws" <sup>4</sup> will not be able to account for the way in which social institutions have for the most part arisen. Popper maintains that the characteristic features of social life are largely undesigned and result from the unintended consequences of actions undertaken by individuals:

"only a minority of social institutions are consciously designed while the vast majority have just 'grown', as the undesigned results of human actions." 5.

Thus an individualism which seeks to explain social institutions in psychological terms, by men's motives and intentions alone, will completely misconstrue their genesis. Psychologistic explanations of social institutions must fall back on methodological myths:

"Psychologism is thus forced, whether it likes it or not, to operate with the idea of a beginning of society, and with the idea of a human nature and a human psychology as they existed prior to society." 6.

1. OS, II, 94.

2. OS, II, 95.

3. OS, II, 94.

4. OS, II, 98.

5. PH, 65, cf. OS, II, 93.

6. OS, II, 93.



Psychologism requires that purely psychological origins of social institutions be found:

"that sociology must in principle be reducible to social psychology" 1.

and this, Popper thinks amounts to historicism:<sup>2.</sup>

"The attempt to reduce the facts of our social environment forces us into speculations about origins and developments." 3.

The kind of origins for social institutions which psychologism is committed to uncover presuppose a completely unreal essence:

"the idea of human nature and a human psychology as they existed prior to society." 4.

An unsympathetic reading of Popper's argument here for the historicist outcome of psychologism, might suggest that

"the idea of historico-causal development" 5.

or a genetic approach is what Popper objects to as historicism.<sup>6.</sup> What Popper is, I think, objecting to, is not a genetic approach as such - although he does not see much use in it - but the unrealistic speculations which the genetic approach of methodological psychologism requires.

In delineating the progress of Popper's methodological individualism, from its opposition to collectivism through its separation from psychologism, I have described Popper's presentation of methodological individualism as dialectical. Popper would, I think, object to this description because of

1. OS, II, 88.

2. OS, II, 92, 98.

3. OS, II, 92

4. OS, II, 93.

5. OS, II, 92.

6. This unsympathetic reading might be supported with such evidence as Popper's reference to historical method, in the passage on an empirical social science, cited above, p. ~~273~~<sup>273</sup>; or OS, II, 75 and the argument which Popper sums up, PH, 34.

"...the doctrine that the social sciences must adopt a historical method...the doctrine of historicism."

Popper's position on genetic or developmental approaches is roughly this: he objects to several misuses of developmental terminology - and he sometimes phrases his objections rather loosely - and he does not see that the notion of development might be fruitfully used in the practice of history.

the infamous associations that he thinks dialectical logic has with historicism. He would prefer his own terminology: to describe his presentation of methodological individualism as illustrating the critical approach. Each of these descriptions has something to recommend it. Popper's critical approach to ideas frequently takes a dialectical form, in that the ideas he defends emerge from a confrontation with two other sets of doctrines that he opposes.<sup>1.</sup>

To describe Popper's presentation of methodological individualism as dialectical in form is a more exact specification of the stages by which methodological individualism emerges, than is the designation of Popper's approach to the analysis of social collectives as, simply, a critical one. Nevertheless, Popper's dialectical presentation of methodological individualism, whereby he argues that it eliminates the vitiating defects of both methodological collectivism and methodological psychologism for social analysis, does not suffice to establish methodological individualism as a methodology. The positive merits of methodological individualism must be considered in this connection, as well as its critical uses. Apart from providing a focus for his criticism of methodological collectivism and psychologism - and in the case of methodological holism, Popper's criticism is not based on an accurate representation of the doctrine - Popper's presentation of methodological individualism is for the most part limited to statements of principle,<sup>2.</sup> and more is needed to show that methodological individualism works as a methodology. If it is to meet the claims that Popper makes for it, it must be shown to be applicable and enlightening, without significant exception, in the analysis of social life, and since, in Popper's view, historical work makes tacit use of sociological theories,<sup>3.</sup> methodological individualism must be shown to be at least implicit in the practice of history.

1. The title of Popper's essay, "Three Views Concerning Human Knowledge"(CR) is a give-away in this connection.

2. E.G. PH, 136, 149.

3. PH, 145.

There are two lines to be considered in examining the case Popper makes for methodological individualism beyond its critical uses against collectivism and psychologism. He provides several examples of satisfactory individualistic replacements of analyses that he considers collectivist or historicist, and of course mistaken. I shall consider the implications of these examples for the general problem, of whether the individualistic analysis that Popper recommends is adequate for the social sciences and more especially for the practice of history.

Furthermore, in arguing against psychologism in the concluding pages of The Poverty of Historicism,<sup>1</sup> Popper amplifies the case he has made for methodological individualism against methodological collectivism and psychologism, in a way that brings out just what is at issue in this question of competing methodologies. Methodological individualism is the

"quite unassailable doctrine that we must try to understand all collective phenomena as due to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes, and thoughts of individual men, and as due to traditions created and preserved by individual men." 2.

Some of the arguments which Popper brings here against psychologism have already been considered. The social sciences cannot be based on psychology of the study of "'human nature'"; Popper has argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that we cannot study human nature without considering such social institutions as the family and language. Here he maintains that what we call

"'human nature' varies considerably with the social institutions, and its study therefore presupposes an understanding of these institutions." 4.

Moreover, psychology cannot account for those

"repercussions which may violate all interests of the actor, whether conscious or unconscious" 5.

1. PH, 157-8.

2. PH, 157

3. Subsequently in "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften" Thesis XXIII, p.245.

4. PH, 158.

5. PH, 158.



and such repercussions are at the "root of social theory".<sup>1</sup> Popper argues that these unintended consequences stem, as has previously been noted,<sup>2</sup> from the "uncertain and wayward" "human factor":<sup>3</sup> no plan for social action can predict all the reactions which individuals may have to the implementation of its measures.

Popper's argument has been that neither collectivism nor psychologism can account for the occurrence of unintended consequences due to the "uncertain human factor", and that this failure is perhaps the major reason for the untenability of both these doctrines. Conversely, the unassailability of methodological individualism consists in its connection with this principle which Popper thinks no theory of political or social action can afford to neglect: the possibility of unforeseeable social repercussions from the actions of individuals.

Popper's argument for methodological individualism thus rests on the connection of theory and practice: the principles of social policy provide criteria for deciding which of several proposed methods of social analysis is acceptable. Popper concludes his argument in support of methodological individualism with a peroration in the tradition of J.S. Mill's On Liberty:

"But is it not possible to control the human factor by science - the opposite of whim? No doubt, biology and psychology can solve, or will soon be able to solve, the 'problem of transforming man'. Yet those who attempt to do this are bound to destroy the objectivity of science, and so science itself, since these are both based upon free competition of thought; that is, upon freedom. If the growth of reason is to continue, and human rationality to survive, then the diversity of individuals and their opinions, aims and purposes must never be interfered with (except in extreme cases where political freedom is endangered). 4.

1. PH, 158. 2. p. <sup>262, 264, 270</sup> ~~21, 22~~ above. 3. PH, 158.

4. PH, 158-9. The parallel here between Popper and Mill is interesting, in view of Popper's severe criticisms of Mill's views on the methods of the social sciences (Books VI, System of Logic), as psychologist and holist.

It was argued above that methodological individualism cannot be derived from either ontological or political individualism, or from their combination; and that it is logically possible to combine methodological holism with ontological and political individualism.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it has been suggested by Dray that the ontological arguments that methodological individualists use in support of their views, although they do not entail methodological individualism, make it difficult to believe, either that there might be irreducible social laws governing "what is constituted by individual actions and attitudes" or that there might be "societal facts" not reducible to individualistic terms without remainder.<sup>2</sup> Popper's argument in support of methodological individualism, just considered, in which the individualistic methodology is alleged to be "unassailable" because of its connection with certain principles that Popper holds govern political and social action willynilly, is of the same order: while it does not entail methodological individualism, it does make it "difficult to believe" that methodological holism might be correct.

But the fact that suicides are committed by individuals, belonging to the "uncertain and wayward" "human factor" does not preclude there being regularities in the rates of these suicides, nor does it put out of court on logical grounds any attempts to explain these regularities in terms of social factors such as anomie. Explanation of the regularities in the rates at which individuals commit suicide might involve methodological holism in a sense which is not covered by Popper's characterizations of collectivism and essentialism.<sup>3</sup> The rates of suicides might be explained by reference to societal facts not reducible to individualistic terms without remainder, and Popper, in the argument considered above, has not given logical grounds for excluding such an explanation.<sup>4</sup>

- 277-78
1. pp. ~~245~~ above.
  2. Dray, op.cit. p.55; the phrase, "societal fact" is due to Mandelbaum.
  3. Cf. pp. ~~245~~ 288 above.
  4. Cf. Chattopadhyaya, op.cit. p.32-33, for the argument that a high post-war rate of suicides and divorces is "to be explained locally by the logic of the situation". Chatopadhyaya proposes this explanation in the course of a catalogue meant to show the untenability of holistic explanations. It is not clear that there is much to separate an explanation of anomie in terms of a moderate methodological holism, and in terms of situational logic.

Methodological individualism must, then, be considered on its merits as a methodological recommendation for the social sciences and for the practice of history. Popper, as was noted above, gives several examples of satisfactory individualistic analyses, and one important issue arising from these examples is the extent to which they can be generalized: whether methodological individualism can be shown to be adequate for the purposes of the historian and the social scientist, and thus to leave no openings for methodological holism in their disciplines.

Popper offers individualistic analyses of scientific method and of reason, which he thinks can replace collectivist interpretations deriving from Hegel. He uses his analysis of scientific method to show the limitations of the sociology of knowledge: a "Marxist doctrine", developed by Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim, which is a "Hegelian version of Kant's theory of knowledge".<sup>1</sup>

To summarize Popper's presentation: the sociology of knowledge locates

"science or knowledge as a process in the mind  
or 'consciousness' of the individual scientist"<sup>2</sup>.

on whom social factors impinge in ways that severely limit what the individual thinker can achieve. His thought is so bound up with his social milieu as not to be valid beyond it. Social factors are thus alleged to be decisive in making what we call knowledge no more than ideology: an expression of ideas reflecting the individual thinker's "social habitat".

1. OS, II, 213. Popper discusses the sociology of knowledge particularly in chap. 23, OS, though he sometimes alludes to it elsewhere as sociologism, e.g. OS, II, 208.

2. OS, II, 217. In "Die Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", (pp.239-240), Popper criticizes the vogue of social anthropology for exhibiting the same faults as he had earlier found in the sociology of knowledge: namely, arguing for relativism on the basis of a "naive and mistaken idea of scientific objectivity" as dependent on the objectivity of the individual scientist.



As a counter-example to this analysis of knowledge, Popper argues that no single individual can be said to be impartial or objective in the sense characteristic of scientific method. Scientific method is to be understood as the collaboration of individual scientists in the activity of testing and criticizing proposed theories: as a "friendly-hostile cooperation" which is "socially or institutionally organized."<sup>1</sup> Scientific objectivity then, is due to "the social aspects...of scientific method".<sup>2</sup> Popper's argument thus turns the tables on the claim made by the sociology of knowledge, that the social aspects of knowledge make it impossible for knowledge to be objective:

"Scientific objectivity can be described as the inter-subjectivity of scientific method" 3.

Moreover, against collectivism, "the social aspects...of scientific method" are a matter of collaboration by numerous individuals in the activity of publicizing and criticizing scientific theories and the institutional form which this activity takes.<sup>4</sup> And Popper holds that all forms of knowledge which claim to be objective can and must be appraised in terms of this inter-personal and individualistic model of scientific method.

The "inter-personal theory" which Popper gives of reason, in opposition to the collectivist view of Hegel and the Hegelians, is a generalization of his analysis of scientific method:

"We owe our reason...to certain concrete individuals - though perhaps to a considerable number of anonymous individuals - and to our intellectual intercourse with them. Therefore, in speaking of a 'social' theory of reason (or of scientific method), I mean more precisely that the theory is an inter-personal one, and never that it is a collectivist one." 5.

1. OS, II, 217; OS, II, 220.

2. OS, II, 217

3. OS, II, 217.

4. OS, II, 217-8.

5. OS, II, 226; cf. a longer citation of this passage, p. <sup>290</sup>~~37~~ above.

An example of individualistic analysis which Popper gives, and which is more typical of historical work, is Tolstoy's explanation of the War of 1812 in War and Peace: Tolstoy is in

"reaction against a method of writing history which implicitly accepts the truth of the principle of leadership; a method which attributes much - too much, if Tolstoy is right, as he undoubtedly is - to the great man, the leader. Tolstoy tries to show, successfully I think, the small influence of the actions and decisions of Napoleon, Alexander, Kutuzov, and the other great leaders of 1812, in the face of what may be called the logic of events. Tolstoy points out, rightly, the neglected but very great importance of the decisions and actions of the countless unknown individuals who fought the battles, who burned Moscow, and who invented the partisan method of fighting." 1.

Can the individualistic method of analysis, illustrated in these examples, be shown to be adequate for the practice of history and the social sciences? Popper's analysis of scientific method may be cogent, and his use of the example from Tolstoy compelling against hero-worship in historiography. Tolstoy's analysis of the war of 1812 is "rock-bottom", to use J.W.N. Watkins' phrase, because he refers to the individuals who actually fought the battles that constituted the war. In the simplest paradigm of scientific activity, according to Popper's analysis, several individuals test and criticize each other's proposed theories, and the "socially or institutionally organized objectivity of science"<sup>2</sup> can be viewed as embodying this simple model.

1. PH, 148. But Tolstoy is historicist, according to Popper, in that "he believes that he can see some kind of historical determination in these events..." Nonetheless, the reaction against history written in terms of hero-worship is, Popper thinks, a sound element in historicism.

Popper, on the next page (PH, 149) also praises Tolstoy for his unconscious use of situational logic. This combination of methodological individualism and situational logic suggests the close relationship for which I have argued, in this chapter, between methodological individualism and situational logic: that methodological individualism in practice often works out as a situational approach.

2. OS, II, 220.

Individualistic analyses thus appear to be appropriate in some cases where the individuals in the explanans are directly involved in the events to be explained, for then reference to individuals can - sometimes - seem to be "rock-bottom"; but it is not obvious that this observation can be generalized. There are cases where individuals are directly involved in the events to be explained, and reference to individuals may not be considered adequate to explain these events.

One example introduced by Maurice Mandelbaum<sup>1</sup> has by now become notorious for the difficulties it presents for methodological individualists. The problem is how to explain to a Trobriand Islander why a bank teller responds with cash when he is given a properly filled-in withdrawal slip under certain circumstances. An explanation of these events might begin by speaking of accounts and balances, and the established procedures by which money may be withdrawn or deposited. But, the puzzled Trobriand Islander might inquire, why should the man behind bars give money to the client who submits a withdrawal slip in accordance with these procedures? Surely if the client approached the teller with such a slip at a social gathering, he would not be rewarded with money. The critic of methodological individualism then argues that the explanation of the bank teller's behaviour refers to his role as an employee of a bank, which he fulfils in a bank during banking hours. To explain what such a role amounts to requires referring to "societal facts": "facts concerning the forms of organization present in a society"<sup>2</sup>.

The claim is that concepts referring to societal facts cannot be analysed in terms of the actions and interactions of individuals without remainder. Thus the personnel of a bank may consist of its president, manager, tellers and accountants, and these individuals make up the bank because each has a role in its functioning: the role which a bank teller fulfils cannot be resolved "into statements concerning his behaviour towards

1. "Societal Facts", in Theories of History, ed. P. Gardiner (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1959, 476-488.

2. Mandelbaum, op. cit. p.478-9.



other individuals".<sup>1.</sup> Thus an explanation of a bank in terms of the individuals who perform banking functions requires "societal concepts".<sup>2.</sup>

An explanation of these events acceptable to a Popperite takes some piecing together. It was noted above that Popper, in a later statement of methodological individualism, includes situations among the individualistic terms to which an acceptable explanation may refer.<sup>3.</sup> This suggestion has been amplified as "situational individualism" in a thesis written under Popper's direction: Individuals and Societies: a methodological inquiry, by D.P. Chattopadhyaya.<sup>4.</sup> It was suggested above that situational individualism represents a modification of methodological individualism which several of its defenders have reached as a result of criticism of their original proposals. Chattopadhyaya's discussion is the most useful for explicating situational individualism, because he goes into it at some length and attempts to show that it can make sense of the problem posed by Mandelbaum's example. Hence, the following presentation of situational individualism derives from Popper's ideas only at second hand. It is however indicative of the outcome of attempting to make good the claim that methodological individualism can accommodate certain characteristic problems of history and the social sciences.

Chattopadhyaya argues that methodological individualism incorporates the insights of holism without falling prey to its defects.<sup>5.</sup> A methodological individualist "does not deny the reality of social wholes" nor "say that these terms designate some unreal fictions".<sup>6.</sup> Social wholes exist, but in a quite different sense from that in which individuals exist.<sup>7.</sup>

"all social wholes exist in the beliefs of individuals and operate through the meaning-oriented actions of individuals".<sup>8.</sup>

1 Mandelbaum, op. cit. p. 480.

2. Mandelbaum, op. cit., p.479-480.

3. pp. 272 above.

4. Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1967.

5. Chattopadhyaya, op. cit., p.1, 17, 23.

6. Ibid., p.2, 4. Compare Popper PH, 135-6.

7. Ibid., p.2.

8. Ibid., p.5. However, the existence of society is not "purely subjective".

"It has its objectivity in that all other individuals believe in the existence of society as I do." (p.5.)

Chattopadhyaya alleges that Hayek forgets this point in his emphasis on the subjective character of the data of the social sciences.

Social wholes

"are like quasi-permanent systems of situations"

and

"these situations are essentially human creations".<sup>1.</sup>

As for the notion of role theory, to which the critic of methodological individualism may refer, in the example of the bank transaction:

"I agree that the actions of individuals are to be understood in the light of their roles and statuses,"

but

"statuses and roles are situationally determined, and therefore may be changed by the ideas and actions of the individuals involved." 2.

Chattopadhyaya may be attacking a straw man in this criticism of role theory: the contention which methodological individualists must answer is, not that roles are iron determinants of individual behaviour, but that an individual's behaviour can often be explained in terms of a role which the individual fulfils, and that such an explanation cannot be resolved "into statements concerning" the individual's "behaviour towards other individuals".

Chattopadhyaya argues that the standard which a methodological individualist must meet is not that of giving an explanation in completely individualistic terms in any particular instance. The context in which Chattopadhyaya propounds this argument is a discussion of Mandelbaum's article, "Societal Facts", in which the bank-transaction example occurs:

"At every level of our understanding or explanation of a social event we are obliged to make use of some societal facts. But at a different level we may reduce these societal facts to their individual components. Even at that level one must take note of some other societal facts, which may be further analysed individualistically. In explanation of every social event, we need societal facts, which may be further analysed individualistically. If it is claimed that societal facts are unanalysable or irreducible, then we have to

1. Chattopadhyaya, op. cit., p.3

2. Ibid., p.7

give up every hope of ascertaining the meaning of the statements containing societal terms. And if it is claimed that societal facts are irreducible in the sense that at no level of explanation of social event can we totally dispense with societal facts, there is nothing to object to; but, at the same time, it has to be added that societal facts themselves may be analysed into, and explained by, individualistic terms at a different level." 1.

The objection of infinite regress is avoided by viewing societal facts as part of the situation at any given level of explanation, and "there is no absolute level of explanation." 2. Thus methodological individualism, as situationalism, is more a matter of principle to be satisfied in the last analysis, than a practice of "rock-bottom" explanation.

Adherence to the principle of methodological individualism in its situational modification would nonetheless seem to imply that "we have to give up every hope of ascertaining the meaning of statements containing" terms such as "'renaissance' or 'the government'" if we accept Dray's argument that such terms are "logically holistic" in that

"there seems to be no finite list of individual actions and attitudes that would count as their exemplifications; yet the problem does not seem to be one simply of vagueness. Appropriate exemplifications, furthermore, seem to vary from culture to culture without our being able to say that the relevant terms are ambiguous - which suggests, perhaps, an evaluative element in their meanings. Terms within this range of social description appear to be logically holistic." 3.

But methodological individualism, and its situational variant as well, is, I shall argue, not so much a semantic as a political principle. The term 'renaissance' might be admissible in historiography so long as it was not hypostatized as a social whole, even if no fully individualistic analysis of the term were in sight. Popper might claim that an individualistic

1. Chattopadhyaya, op. cit. p.15.

2. Ibid., p. 51-52, p. 41.

3. Dray, op. cit. p.57.



analysis of 'renaissance' could be produced by constructing an open-ended model, as it were.

To return to the example discussed above: a methodological individualist might propose, as an explanation of the bank transaction in Popperite terms, that in giving out cash for a valid withdrawal slip, the bank clerk acted in terms of the logic of his situation as bank clerk; the acceptable term 'situation' thus replaces the objectionable<sup>1</sup> term 'role'. The description of the bank clerk's situation may include some societal facts, e.g. about the bank, but the salvation of the methodological individualist is his belief that any such societal fact mentioned can be

"analysed into, and explained by, individualistic terms at a different level"

at which further societal facts may be mentioned which themselves may be subsequently analysed individualistically at still another level. Against this explanation it might be objected that situation is a euphemism for societal facts. A Popperite nonetheless finds it preferable and enlightening, for reasons which I shall attempt to explain.

There are, then, several devices by which Popperites can attempt to make room for societal facts in individualistic explanations without either renouncing their principles or becoming holistic in the senses that Popper specifies. They may view these societal facts as due to the interaction of numerous or countless anonymous individuals.<sup>2</sup> Such an analysis may be more a matter of principle than of practice. Secondly, and I think

1. I.C. Jarvie, The Revolution in Anthropology (London, 1964):

"As Popper...put it in lectures, sociologists have an interesting idea with their role theory. But it is a terrible idea for what they don't see is that although we do have abstract dealings with people it verges on immorality for us to do so because it amounts to treating people as a means. While to some extent we cannot escape it in modern society, we ought constantly to strive to. For sociologists to produce a theory which is interested only in these abstractions is unpleasant."

2. Goldstein, "The Two Theses of Methodological Individualism" BJPS, v.9, pp. 9, 11, argues that Watkins uses anonymous individuals and anonymous dispositions "as a way of avoiding holism".

more important in considering Popper's methodological individualism, they may view these societal facts as part of the situations in which individuals act, and they may lower the sights of methodological individualism as suggested by Chattopadhyaya, so that it is not necessary to analyse all terms referring to social collectives individualistically in the course of any one explanation; some collective terms may be allowed to stand, as describing the situations in which individuals act. Terms referring to social collectives may be used in acceptable individualistic explanations with the proviso that they can in principle be reduced to individualistic terms. Thus methodological individualism once again emerges as a principle rather than a practice of analysis, and the situational formulation of the principle permits a rapprochement in practice, if not in theory, with moderate methodological holists.

Methodological individualism, on this view, need not be unrelentingly applied in the practice of history, and indeed, it is difficult to see how it could be so applied without historiography becoming ponderous at best. Moreover, terms referring to social collectives may be used as long as the principle of methodological individualism is kept in mind as a safeguard against hypostatizing these collective terms, with all the heinous consequences which this practice may have for the political rights of the individual. It is preferable to speak of individuals as acting in situations, rather than to use terms which have suffered from holistic misuses.

Use of the terminology of situational analysis thus expresses the commitment of the Popperite methodological individualist to the principle that social collectives can and must eventually be analysed individualistically. Popperite methodological individualism is thus an insistence on the principle of individualistic analysis: a principle which does not require its adherent to give a thoroughgoing individualistic analysis in any specific explanation, although he may of course do so in some cases. Thus the development of Popper's doctrine in the hands of his students reflects the rapprochement between methodological individualists and methodological holists. which Dray detects.<sup>1</sup>

1. Dray, op. cit., p.58: "Contemporary methodological individualists and holists are not really as far apart as they often seem" Cf. note 2, p. 29 above.  
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If a thoroughgoing individualistic analysis can be postponed indefinitely, as this interpretation of methodological individualism would seem to imply, then, in its bearing on the practice of history, methodological individualism begins to look quite similar to the outcome of Popper's analysis of adequate historical explanation in terms of the hypothetico-deductive model, which he has subsequently described as indicating only the logical "background" of historical explanation - a feature of historical explanations which subsequent discussion has much overdone. With methodological individualism as with the hypothetico-deductive model of historical explanation, the outcome of Popper's methodological prescriptions is situational logic; but this analogy is limited. The reasoning which Popper uses to support the principle of methodological individualism is rather different from that of Popper's argument that the logical background of historical explanation must be in universal laws. In the latter case, the reasoning derived from Popper's views on scientific method: the logical requirements for adequate explanations provide security against attempts to evade falsification, to which Popper thinks a conventionalist view of scientific theories is particularly prone; if scientific laws are allowed to be of less than universal validity, then there are openings for ad hoc stratagems in the face of falsifying evidence, for such a law can be salvaged by adding the proviso that it does not apply in cases of the kind that would otherwise falsify it. By contrast, the principle, if not the thoroughgoing practice, of methodological individualism must be maintained to safeguard against political collectivism.

Methodological individualism thus turns out to be a matter of principle, on which Popper insists because of his commitment to political individualism, a commitment which I take to be the central constituent of his liberalism. Although the methodological doctrines of individualism or holism may be held independently of the corresponding political doctrines, Popper attempts to establish intimate connections between his political and his methodological views. But his political individualism does not, as I have argued, entail methodological individualism. It is not the case that acceptance of the maxim that we must do our utmost to prevent or minimize suffering on the



part of individuals, requires that all explanations of social events be framed in individualistic terms. The belief that "human individuals must be recognized to be the ultimate concern...of all politics"<sup>1</sup> does not yield what is required to establish methodological individualism; it is compatible with the view that there are "societal facts" which cannot be completely explained in individualistic terms. Suppose such an allegedly "societal fact" were identified as causing individuals to suffer; it might also be the case that the removal of the phenomenon promised to cause even greater suffering, and it would thus be prohibited by the principle of negative utilitarianism. Thus political individualism as Popper defends it does not entail methodological individualism.

It was suggested above that Popper's defence of political individualism was one of the main reasons for his criticism of Historismus through his criticism of historicism. His presentation of methodological individualism is meant to immunize against empirical associations such as were made between the methodological ideas of Historismus, and certain anti-liberal, because anti-individualist ideas of political theory popular in Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

#### IV. The Relevance of Methodological Individualism

The preceding argument has centred on a methodological appraisal of methodological individualism, and an analysis of its connection with questions of social policy, and this is to take a narrow view of what Popper is defending in the name of methodological individualism. It has been suggested that the implementation of methodological individualism has its difficulties: apart from the frequent necessity of explaining familiar social facts in terms of the decisions and actions of countless anonymous individuals, the avoidance of infinite regress may necessitate referring

1. OS, I, 288-9, note 7 to chapter 9.

to situations which are said to be ultimately analysable in individualistic terms, rather than analysing social events in thoroughgoing individualistic terms. Popper insists that we must analyse all social collectives as due to the decisions and actions of individuals, in spite of the aforementioned difficulties, because otherwise the way is open for individuals to evade their responsibility for what happens in social life.

An analogy might be drawn between methodological individualism and Popper's insistence that scientific laws satisfy certain stipulations as the only safeguard against attempts to evade falsification. Although Popper insists on certain methodological requirements as the only safeguards against the evasion of falsification with respect to scientific theories, or the evasion of the moral responsibility of individuals for social events, it can, I think be argued in both cases that his recommended safeguards do not do the trick.<sup>1</sup> This can be shown in the case of methodological individualism with a too timely example: of the explanations given for the assassination of Robert Kennedy. The standard and superficial analysis refers to the violence endemic in American society which is canalized in the lack<sup>2</sup> of control of the possession of fire-arms. That the political rights of Americans, set forth in the Constitution, have been interpreted as the right to uncontrolled possession of firearms, can be explained in terms of American history: the West was won, amidst a bloodshed not paralleled in the Canadian West, because each and every settler had the right to a gun to protect himself, his family and his property from the threat of attack. That the conflicts in American society have a sanctified outlet in the possession of guns can be ascribed to the countless anonymous individuals who were active in the conquest of the West. Thus the explanation of the social conditions which made possible the assassination of Robert Kennedy meets the standards of methodological individualism. But does it follow from the above explanation that every single American is individually responsible for the killing of Robert Kennedy? I

1. Cf. Chapter Two<sup>69</sup> for the argument with respect to scientific theories.

2. Now minimal control.

think not. There are numerous individuals who can do little to change the climate of violence, even though they may do all that is within their power as individuals. The social institutions fostering violence have acquired a power of their own which these individuals can do little if anything to arrest. The institutions of violence exist in America, and if they can be said to be "manned",<sup>1</sup> they are so in ways contrary to the wishes and efforts of liberals, or men of good hope. The analysis of these social institutions, in accordance with methodological individualism, does not entail that all individuals living in America, here and now, are morally responsible for what happens in connection with these institutions. The ethical argument for methodological individualism - that it is the only security against the evasion of the moral responsibility of individuals for the character of social life - does not hold.

What, then, does such an individualistic analysis add to our understanding of social life? Is it the only alternative to the theism preserved in historicism?<sup>2</sup> explaining social events in terms of supra-individual forces which have a juggernaut effect? Rather I think it can be argued that one tenable alternative to the postulate of methodological individualism, that the self-contained individual is the ultimate unit of social analysis, is the view that individuals are constituted by their social relations, as suggested above<sup>3</sup>. in discussing Popper's classification of Hegel and Marx as historicists. Social collectives, which Popper says must be recognised as theoretical constructions, fully analysable in individualistic terms, are nonetheless familiar facts of social life. What we want to know is how these social collectives operate here and now, rather than to resolve them

1. Popper's characteristic phrase, e.g. OS, I, 126:

"Institutions are like fortresses. They must be well designed and manned."

Cf. PH, 66, where Popper uses almost the same phrases, except for saying that institutions must be "properly manned."

2. Cf. "Prediction and Prophecy," CR, p. 346; and also OS, chapter 25, sec. iv (OS, II, 271-280).

3. Chapter Four above, section iv.



into the actions, decisions and attitudes of countless anonymous individuals, which led to the formation of these collectives; the individualistic analysis may be correct but it is not relevant to what we want to understand.

Popper argues that methodological individualism is the only method of social analysis which gives due recognition to the integrity of the individual: that the "uncertain" "human factor" is ultimately unfathomable. But Popper's insistence that the individual is both self-contained and unfathomable runs contrary to what we do know about social life. There are familiar facts of social life which are recognised as collectives and which help to make individuals what they are, which is less unfathomable than Popper contends. If we assert that individuals are shaped by the climate of violence in America, then we are saying that individuals may act violently, or be disheartened by the realization that their whole-hearted efforts to abolish the institutions of violence are nugatory, because these institutions operate as though they were something more than a matter of the decisions, actions, and attitudes of individuals.

But this assertion does not entail the view, which Popper ascribes to historicism, that individuals are no more than reflexes of collective entities. Individuals are shaped by their social relations, and any individual is shaped by his relations to numerous social institutions and consequently cannot be said to be a reflex of any single social collective. Both individuals and social collectives must be considered if we are to understand social life, but this approach is not holistic in the sense of submerging the individual in any single social "whole" - although individuals are, in this approach, less self-contained than Popper contends. Popper's reasons for insisting on this view of the individual have been criticized. The individualistic analysis which Popper recommends does not entail that individuals are morally responsible for whatever happens in the society in which they live, as the individualistic analysis of the assassination of Robert Kennedy shows; nor need the view that the individual is shaped by his social relations undermine the integrity of the individual; and the individualistic analysis which Popper recommends does not answer all the questions which may reasonably be

raised about social life: it does not explain the difficulties in changing the institutions of violence in America. Such an explanation must refer both to attributes of individuals, and also to what individuals consider to be the realities of social life. As W.I. Thomas said,

"'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,'" 1.

and social collectives are real in at least this sense. Sociological theory must, I think, attempt to explain how men act in social situations, wherein social collectives are familiar facts, rather than, as Popper suggests, attempt to apply ethical postulates which do not take account of what we know of social life.

1. Cited by Lewis Coser and Bernard Rosenberg in Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings, 2nd edition (New York, 1964), p. 232.

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- I. Works of Popper's relevant to the concerns of this thesis.
- II. Books, reviews and articles discussing Popper.
- III. Logical Positivism.
- IV. Historical explanation.
- V. Historicism.
- VI. Methodological individualism and social policy.

In sections III-VI I have not sought to cover the literature but only to indicated those works which I have found useful in developing the arguments presented in the above thesis.

The following abbreviations are used for journals:

ASSV	Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume
BJPS	British Journal for the Philosophy of Science
HT	History and Theory
PR	Philosophical Review

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